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THE MEN OF THE NINETIES

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BY

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10.2.21.

LONDON
HENRY DANIELSON
64 CHARING CROSS ROAD, W.C.2
1920

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THE MEN OF THE NINETIES

PROLOGUE

THE day Beardsley left his stool and ledger in a London insurance office and betook himself seriously to the illustration of that strange comic world of Congreve, a new manifestation of English art blossomed. It had, no doubt, been a long time germinating in the minds of many men, and there had been numerous signs pointing the way on which the artistic tendencies of the nineties would travel. For example, just about the same time as Beardsley's eighteenth year, a coterie of young men, fresh from the Varsity in many cases, made their appearance in London openly proclaiming the doctrine of art for art's sake under the ægis of Oscar Wilde. So in the last age of hansom cabs and dying Victorian etiquette, these young men determined that the rather dull art and literary world of London should flower like another Paris.

If, for the sake of making a beginning, one

must fix on that memorable day when Beardsley burnt his boats as the date of the opening of the period of the nineties, it must be remembered that this arbitrary limitation of the movement is rather a convenience than a necessity. To divide up anything so continuous as literature and art into sections like a bookcase is uncommonly like damming up a portion of a stream to look at the fish in it. It breaks the contact between what was before and what came after. However, as one must go a long way back to investigate accurately how a new movement in art arises, and as it is tedious to follow up all the clues that lead to the source, it will be perhaps as well not to worry too much over the causes of the movement or over the influences from which it arose. Let us accept the fact so well pointed out by Mr. W. G. Blaikie Murdoch in *The Renaissance of the Nineties*, that the output of the nineties was 'a distinct secession from the art of the previous age . . . , in fact the eighties, if they have a distinct character, were a time of transition, a period of simmering for revolt rather than of actual outbreak; and it was in the succeeding ten years that, thanks to certain young men, an upheaval was really made.'

It is to France if anywhere we can trace the

causes of this new attitude. First of all, in painting, the great French impressionists, with Manet and Monet leading them; the doctrine of plein air painting, and all the wonder of this new school of painting gave a new thrill to art. Then about 1885 the literary symbolists killed the Parnassian school of poetry, while at the same time there was a new *esplozione naturlistica.* Paris, always the city of light, was again fluting new melodies for the world. In the Rue de Rome, Stéphane Mallarmé received all the world of art and letters. To the Rue de Rome came Whistler, John Payne, George Moore, Oscar Wilde, and others. The French influence that swept over to England was as powerful as that which stirred artistic Germany, creating a German period of the nineties in the group of symbolists who, under Stefan George, issued the now famous *Blätter für die Kunst.* The Englishmen, indeed, who attended these soirées of the Rue de Rome did not come away empty-handed. Not only did their own work suffer an artistic change through this influence, but they handed it on to their successors. So directly and indirectly the great French painters and writers of the day influenced the art of England, creating the opportunity for a distinct secession from the

art of the previous age. At the same time French art and literature were never stationary but always developing. It was only in 1890 that we find the real Régnier appearing. In the same year Paul Fort, just eighteen summers like Beardsley, founded the Théâtre d'Art. All this French art at high pressure had a stimulating effect on English art; and, in fact, remained its main stimulus until the Boer War, when the imperialism of writers like Kipling became the chief interest. So it was in no small degree the literary symbolists, the plein air painters and all the motives that lay behind them, that awoke the Englishmen of the nineties to new possibilities in art and life. In Paris, in 1890, Rothenstein met Conder, and at once the two became lifelong friends. There they encountered artists like Toulouse Lautrec and Anquetin.

The first men, of course, to realise this feverish activity in France were the elder men, who handed on the tidings to the younger majority. Thus the men of the eighties turned the attention of the unknown of the nineties towards France, so that Englishmen again began to remember that something else counted in Paris besides lingerie. In dealing then with the influences that helped to beget

the period, it is as well to remember that if Walter Pater and Whistler were its forerunners, so to speak, Oscar Wilde and George Moore were responsible in no small degree for many of the tendencies that afterwards became prevalent.

Wilde himself, in fact, was artistically an influence for evil on his weaker juniors. His social success, his keen persiflage, his indolent pose of greatness, blinded them as much as it did the οἱ πολλοί to his real artistic industry and merit. His worst works were, in fact, with one exception, his disciples. Richard Le Gallienne in his *Quest of the Golden Girl* and *Prose Fancies* was watered-down Wilde, and very thin at that. Even John Davidson, in *Baptist Lake* and *Earl Lavender*, strove in vain to overtake the masterly ease with which Wilde's ordered prose periods advance like cohorts of centurions to the sound of a full orchestra. Wilde's best work—his *Prose Poems*, his poem *The Harlot's House*, his one-acter *Salomé*, and one or two of the stories in the *House of Pomegranates*—will, however, remain as some of the finest flowers of the age's art. Yet Wilde, in reality, was senior to the nineties proper, and was much too good an artist to approve of much of the work that was

done in imitation of himself during the period by the mere hangers-on of the nineties. He was with the men of the nineties, but not of them. Beardsley, indeed, the age's real king, took the liberty of mocking at Wilde in the very illustrations, or rather decorations, intended for Wilde's most elaborate production. Wilde, in his turn, never wrote for *The Yellow Book*, which he disliked intensely. Again, we know what Symons's opinion of Wilde was from his essay on him as a poseur. In fact, Wilde was a writer apart from the others, though undoubtedly his presence among them up to the time of his débâcle was a profound direct influence.

On the other hand, George Moore, as a reactionary influence against Victorianism,[1] as a senior who had lived and written in Paris, was more of an indirect factor for the younger men. For a time he lived in the Temple, where many of them had come to live. By his works he helped to disseminate the influences of the great French writers and painters that had come into his own life. His own writings came to others surcharged with 'The poisonous honey of France.' In his *Modern Painting*, in his novel, *Evelyn Innes*, in his era of servitude to

[1] See his *Literature at Nurse*, 1885.

Flaubert's majesty, he is of the nineties. But the nineties with George Moore were merely a phase out of which he grew, as out of many others. But when the nineties began Moore contrived to assist at their birth in the same way as he did later at that of the Celtic renaissance. Indeed, it is said, in Moore's novel, *Mike Fletcher* (1889), one can obtain a glimpse of the manner in which the period was to burgeon.

There was, indeed, amongst the younger men in those early days a wonderful spirit of camaraderie. It was an attractive period full of the glamour of youth before it went down fighting for Art with a capital A, before age had chilled its blood or dulled its vision. And there came, no doubt, an immense vitality for them all, a stimulating energy to each one, from this meeting together in London. Indeed, coming together by chance, as it were, in London, they not only discovered one another and the ineffable boon of comradeship, but they also rediscovered, through Whistler, London for art. So once again the streets of London began to be written about, not it is true in the Dickens manner, but still with even as great a love as his. They went so far as to attempt to institute real French café life, by having meetings

at the Cheshire Cheese and evenings in the Domino Room of the Café Royal. Symons wrote of the ballets of Leicester Square; Dowson of the purlieus round the docks; Davidson made poems of Fleet Street; Binyon sang of white St. Martin's and the golden gallery of St. Paul's; Crackanthorpe sketched his London vignettes; Street talks of the indefinable romance of Mayfair. In fact the nineties brought the Muses back to town. In a cabman's shelter, in Soho restaurants of doubtful cheapness, in each other's rooms, they rejoiced in each other's company. At the same time Beardsley, by a stroke of luck through the good services of friends, was commissioned by Mr. Dent to illustrate *Le Morte d'Arthur*. The Bodley Press had begun in Vigo Street in 1887. Symons, Yeats, and others had already published their first books. The curtain had gone up on the drama of the nineties, of which this is intended as a brief appreciation.

At the date of the appearance of these young men amid a mass of lucubrators, there was actually a band of genuine young writers (besides the big Victorians like Meredith and Hardy), who were turning out good work, and who were under the sway of that old Pan of poetry, Henley of *The National Observer*. These

young men of Henley must not be therefore confused with the *Yellow Book* group. They were often deliberately coarse, not because they liked it, but because it was part of their artistic gospel. And when one considers the methods of the feeblest of them, one sees more ruffianly sturdy British horseplay than art, more braying and snarling than sounding on the lute. But among the best of them, Stevenson, Kipling, and Steevens, was a fine loyalty to the traditions of the leading spirit of the *Observer* Henley—Pan playing on his reed with his crippled hoofs hiding amid the water-lilies of the purling stream. All these last writers and artists were men of the Anglo-Saxon tradition; while, on the other hand, the young men who had, so to speak, just come to town, were full of the Latin tradition. The main thing in the lives of these last was French literature and art, and out of this influence came not only the art, but the eccentricities, of the coterie, which is so often called the nineties. Theirs was a new spirit. They were of the order of the delectable 'Les Jeunes.' Epigram opened a new career with Oscar Wilde; Beardsley dreamed of a strange world; Ernest Dowson used to drink hashish and make love in Soho in the French manner of Henri Murger's Latin Quarter—for a time,

indeed, hair was worn long, and the ties of the petty homunculi of the Wilde crowd were of lace; but, fortunately, artists like Beardsley and the other men worth while did not cultivate foolishness except as a protection against the bourgeois.

But enough of these affectations; the point I wish to bring out here is that the men who drew and wrote for *The Savoy* wrote their art with a difference to that of those others who were their contemporaries but appeared in the first instance as a virile imperialistic movement in *The Scots Observer* and *The National Observer*. The artists of the nineties were more, as we say rather badly in English, of the 'kid-glove school.' A note of refinement, a distinction of utterance, an obsession in Art marked all their best as well as their worst work. But this by no means prevented the two schools having a very salutary influence on each other. Indeed, we find a man like Mr. W. B. Yeats, who really belonged to a third movement, his own Celtic renaissance, publishing first of all lyrics like 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' under the banner of Henley, and attending a year or two later the Rhymers' Club meetings before he found his own demesne. But to his former comrades of the Cheshire Cheese, the men

who concern us here, Yeats has found occasion to render befitting praise in the well-known lines:

> You had to face your ends when young—
> 'Twas wine or women, or some curse—
> But never made a poorer song
> That you might have a heavier purse;
>
> Nor gave loud service to a cause
> That you might have a troop of friends:
> You kept the Muses' sterner laws
> And unrepenting faced your ends.

In fact, since influences and counter-influences in all ages of literature are such subtle vermin to ferret out, I propose to avoid as far as possible any generalities in that connection, and to interpret broadly and briefly a somewhat vague period that reviewers have acquired the habit of calling 'the nineties.' What then was this period? It was a portion of the last decade of the last century which began about 1890, and passing through the Rhymers' Club, blossomed out into *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy* periodicals, and produced works like Beardsley's drawings, Conder's fans, Dowson's poetry, and Hubert Crackanthorpe's short stories. The men who composed the group are too numerous to recall in their entirety, even if a satisfactory list of such a nature could be produced. So all

I intend to attempt here is a summary of the activities of certain typical examples of the group as will serve to furnish an appreciation of their general work. And the way I propose to obtain this view is to begin by considering Beardsley as the central figure of the period; to deal next with the two most vital manifestoes of the movement and their respective literary editors, *The Yellow Book* and Henry Harland, *The Savoy* and Mr. Arthur Symons, passing on in turn to the writers of fiction, the poets, the essayists and dramatists not of the whole decade, but only to those with whom this particular movement is concerned; it will then be time to make a few deductions on the spirit of the whole of this tendency. By rigidly adhering to only those men who were actually of the nineties group I am only too conscious these pages will be considered often to be lacking in the great literary events and figures of the age, such as Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, the rise of the Kipling star, the tragedy of Wilde, the coming of Conrad, etc. etc. Yet the sole object of this scant summary would be defeated if I began to prattle of these and others like Bernard Shaw. In fact its *raison d'être* constrains a method of treatment which must not be broken.

I

TO begin with Aubrey Beardsley has many advantages. For it brings us at once not only to the type of mentality most representative of the period, but also to the man whose creative power was probably the greatest factor of the period, to the boy who changed, as has been said, the black and white art of the world, and to the artist, from whose work we can most easily deduce the leading contemporary characteristics. The art of these men was in a way abnormal, while the men themselves who produced it were exotics; and Beardsley's is not only the most abnormal art of them all, but also he himself is the greatest exotic. As Robert Ross well said as a mere comment on the decade, he is invaluable: 'He sums up all the delightful manias, all that is best in modern appreciation—Greek vases, Italian primitives, the "Hypnerotomachia," Chinese porcelain, Japanese kakemonos, Renaissance friezes, old French and English furniture, rare enamels, mediæval

illumination, the débonnaire masters of the eighteenth century, the English pre-Raphaelites.' In Beardsley, so to speak, was inset all the influences that went to make the period what it was. And another reason why it is so convenient to begin with him is that he and not Oscar Wilde was in reality the great creative genius of the age. Besides his black-and-white work all the world knows, in which, as Father Gray says, 'His imaginative gifts never showed a sign of fatigue or exhaustion,'[1] Beardsley practised in other arts. While a youngster at Brighton he promised to become a musical prodigy, and in later days Symons describes him at a Wagner concert gripping the seat with nervous intensity. He wrote some charming poetry, and as picturesque a fairy tale for grown-ups as has ever been written in *Under the Hill*. In an interview he states, probably slyly, he was at work in 1895 on a modern novel[2]; while in 1897 he said, 'Cazotte has inspired me to make some small contes. I have one in hand now called *The Celestial Lover*.' He began once to write a play with the actor, Brandon Thomas. In

[1] *Last Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, with an Introduction by the Rev. John Gray, 1904.

[2] *The Sketch*, April 10, 1895.

his late illustrations for Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* he was clearly working towards water-colour work, while at one time he began under Walter Sickert his only oil painting (unfinished), 'Women regarding a dead mouse.' By no means least, he became a leader in English poster work. All of this was essentially creative work. And when death came he was very far from his artistic or intellectual maturity. So is it not just to say that this young man who practised nearly all the forms of art, and who was also an avid reader and student, remains the chief creative figure of the nineties?

Indeed, there is no more pleasing personality in the whole period than this 'apostle of the grotesque,' as his own decade loved to hail him. Born at Brighton in 1872 he was educated at the local Grammar School, whose magazine, *Past and Present*, contains his earliest work. The Kate Greenaway picture books, it is said, started him drawing. At school he was neither keen on his work or games, but used to be continually doing 'little rough, humorous sketches.' Reading was his great refuge, and when he fell in with some volumes of the Restoration dramatists he had already begun to find his feet in that world

of the mad lusts of Wycherley and the perfumed artificiality of Congreve. Of school life itself he speaks bitterly and with no regret. At sixteen he must have been particularly glad to escape from it and enter, first of all, an architect's office in London, and then, the next year, the Guardian Life and Fire Assurance Office, where his fatal illness unfortunately first began to reveal its presence. Then came his seed-time up till 1891, when he did little but amateur theatricals. But at length Beardsley discovered himself. Many gentlemen have subsequently stated that they discovered him. It may be that they discovered him for themselves, but it was Beardsley and Beardsley alone who found himself. He certainly received, however, a large amount of appreciative sympathy when he started to draw a series of illustrations in his spare time for Congreve's *Way of the World*, and Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*. He was without art training in the usual sense, though he went of nights in 1892 to Professor Brown's night school at Westminster, but still kept to the Insurance Office stool till August, when, after being recognised by Burne-Jones and Watts with kindness, he left his post to live by his art. What had probably actually permitted

him to take this step was the commission given by J. M. Dent to illustrate *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Any way he was launched out by the first number of *The Studio* with Joseph Pennell's article on 'A New Illustrator,' and, what was more important, with eleven of Beardsley's own works. At that time all his art was intuitive without much knowledge of modern black and white. Indeed he was artistically swamped at the moment with the glory of the pre-Raphaelites and Burne-Jones. The *Le Morte d'Arthur*, really, was intended as a kind of rival to the Kelmscott Press publications, and Beardsley in his border designs had small difficulty in excelling Morris's work.

Next year, 1893, finds these influences modified to a certain extent, although the *Salomé* drawings still belong to that cadaverous, lean and hungry world of Burne-Jones, from which Beardsley has not completely as yet rescued himself by means of Frenchmen like Constantin Guys; but his release has well arrived in 1894 with his design 'The Fat Woman,' a caricature of Mrs. Whistler. Watteau, Rops, and the Japanese, and the thousand books he is now reading throw open at last all the splendour of the art world to him. He lacks nothing, and he goes forward borrowing

lavishly, like Shakespeare, from any source that suits him. Beardsley's illustrations are generally critical decorations, although it must never be forgotten he did attempt on more than one occasion a series of illustration pure and simple in, for example, his early scenes for *Manon Lescaut*, *La Dame aux Camélias*, and *Madame Bovary*, which are not altogether successful. He is perhaps at his best as the illustrating critic, which he is somewhat scornfully in *Salomé*, very happily in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, and triumphantly in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. It can be said of his work, rather sweepingly no doubt, but still truthfully, he began by decorating books with his *Le Morte d'Arthur*; he then tried illustrating them; but wound up in criticising them by his decorations. 'Have you noticed,' he once wrote to Father Gray, 'have you noticed that no book ever gets well illustrated once it becomes a classic? Contemporary illustrations are the only ones of any value or interest.' But Beardsley was always more than a mere illustrator, for where a learned Editor writes notes and annotations on Aristophanes, he decorates him; where Arthur Symons would write an essay on *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, Beardsley does a number of critical designs.

It was, in fact, an age of the critical function; but Beardsley's criticism is of that supreme kind Oscar Wilde called 'creative criticism.'

At one time it was customary for critics to plead that he was only a supreme imitator of the Japanese or somebody; but, in reality, as has been pointed out by Robert Ross in his admirable essays on his work, he was as intensely original as an illustrator as Sandro Botticelli was in his designs for Dante's Divine Comedy, or William Blake for the drama of Job. None of them interpreted authors for dull people who could not understand what they read. Perhaps the very best way to appreciate his work of this kind is often to take it away from the text, and say this is the way Beardsley saw *The Rape of the Lock*. As for all the supposed influences he is pretended to have laboured under, it can be at once said, he was too restless a personality to accept merely one influence at a time. If he took from anywhere, he took from everywhere, and the result is a great and original draughtsman, the music of whose line has been the theme of many artists. With little stippled lines in the background, and masses of black in the foreground, the Wagnerites burgeon forth. Black and white in some of his drawings even tell us the colour

of some of the silks his women wear, and his white is the plain white of the paper, not the Chinese subterfuge. A few rhythmic pen-strokes on the virgin sheet and strangely vital people live. The hand of Salomé may be out of drawing, the anatomy of Lysistrata wrong; but, all the same, they live with a rich malevolent life. One has to go back to the Greek vase-painters to find such a vivid life realised with such simple effects. This simplicity and austerity of lines, these few dots for the telling eyelashes, these blank spaces of untouched paper almost insult one with the perfect ease with which everything is accomplished. But, as a matter of fact, how different, how difficult was the actual creation of these designs! What infinite pains, what knowledge went to their composition! 'He sketched everything in pencil, at first covering the paper with apparent scrawls, constantly rubbed out and blocked in again, until the whole surface became raddled from pencil, indiarubber, and knife; over this incoherent surface he worked in Chinese ink with a gold pen, often ignoring the pencil lines, afterwards carefully removed. So every drawing was invented, built up, and completed on the same sheet of paper.'[1] 'But

[1] *Aubrey Beardsley*, by Robert Ross, pp. 38–39. 1909.

Beardsley's subtlety does not lie only in his technique, but also in what he expresses thereby. Looking at his drawings, one always feels in the presence of something alive, something containing deep human interest; and the reason is that, while Beardsley seldom aimed at realistic rendering of the human form, he was a superb realist in another respect, this being that his workmanship always proved itself adequate for the expression of the most subtle emotions, and for the embodiment of the artist's unique personality.'[1]

This charming personality stood him in good stead when the Beardsley craze burst upon London. He had literally set the Thames on fire. It was in 1894, when he became art editor of *The Yellow Book* (which I discuss on another page), that the craze began in earnest. His poster for Dr. John Todhunter's *The Comedy of Sighs*, at the Avenue Theatre, a three-quarter-length figure of a woman in deep blue, standing behind a gauze curtain powdered with light green spots, electrified the dull hoardings of London. Another poster, the female figure in a salmon-pink dress

[1] *The Renaissance of the Nineties*, by W. G. Blaikie Murdoch, p. 29. 1911.

standing opposite a second-hand bookshop, with its scheme of black, green, orange, and salmon pink, advertising Fisher Unwin's *Pseudonym Library*, flashed its colours gaily amid a mass of stupid commercial advertising. Punch parodied 'The Blessed Damozel' with a new version of lauds for 'The Beardsley Girl.' A famous tea-shop exploited the type of female beauty.

Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé* was illustrated by the newly arrived young artist. The columns of the papers and magazines spread his fame, or more often belittled it. The new art magazine, *The Studio*, not only raised him to the skies, but had its first cover done by him. And all this happened to a boy who had only been gone from school six years, and whose total age when he became the art craze of London was only twenty-two. But he was not to stop there. After four more years of crowded, feverish work he was to die, after having affected all the black and white art of the world. He was to be at once accepted in Paris. He was to raise a shoal of imitators, and to influence more or less detrimentally dozens of good artists.

Yet all this phenomenal success was not to change his charming personality in the least.

He still remained Aubrey Beardsley, the boy doomed to death, but still with the lovable heart of a boy who wanted to enjoy life.

Max Beerbohm has given us a wonderful personal record of his friend, in which he says: 'For him, as for the schoolboy whose holidays are near their close, every hour—every minute, even—had its value. His drawings, his compositions in prose and in verse, his reading—these things were not enough to satisfy his strenuous demands on life. He was an accomplished musician, he was a great frequenter of concerts, and seldom when he was in London did he miss a "Wagner night" at Covent Garden. He loved dining-out, and, in fact, gaiety of any kind. . . . He was always most content where there was the greatest noise and bustle, the largest number of people, and the most brilliant light.' In the Domino Room of the Café Royal in London; outside the Brighton Pavilion, whose architecture haunted him all his life, Beardsley was at home and happy. 'I am really happy,' he writes, 'in Paris.' And it was Beardsley's chief preoccupation to communicate in his drawings the surprise and delight which this visible world afforded him—a world of strange demi-mondaines and eupeptic stockbrokers, of odd social

parasites and gullible idiots. He always had an engaging smile that was delightful for friends and strangers; while he was big enough, Robert Ross chronicles, to make friends and remain friends with many for whom his art was totally unintelligible.

After he vacated *The Yellow Book* art editorship, and *The Savoy* had been issued, Leonard Smithers became the real Beardsley publisher. There were no dead-locks with him as to nude Amors, for Smithers had a courage of his own—a courage great enough to issue *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* when Wilde was under his cloud, and no other publisher would look at it. It was Smithers who issued *The Savoy*, the two books of *Fifty Drawings*, *The Rape of the Lock*, *The Pierrot of the Minute*, the designs for *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, and among others the eight 'Lysistrata' and the four 'Juvenal' drawings. For any one to study all this variety and rapid growth to an astounding maturity of conception and execution no better volumes can be recommended than *A Book of Fifty Drawings* (1897), and *A Second Book of Fifty Drawings* (1899). The former book is much the better of the two, for the latter is a book of scraps to a large extent. Indeed, in the first book all

the drawings were fortunately selected by both Beardsley himself and Smithers. The artist allowed no drawing to appear in it with which he was at all dissatisfied. It includes his favourite, 'The Ascension of St. Rose of Lima'; but one cannot help thinking that there have crept into it far too many of his immature *Le Morte d'Arthur* series. For when this volume was issued he had completely discarded that painful method of design. Indeed, the *Salomé* decorations (1894) had bridged this brief spell of his puerility to the rich fulfilment of *The Rape of the Lock* (1896). Whistler at once saw this difference, for, it is on record, when Beardsley first showed these last designs to him he 'looked at them first indifferently, then with interest, then with delight. And then he said slowly, "Aubrey, I have made a very great mistake, you are a very great artist." And the boy burst out crying. All Whistler could say, when he could say anything, was, "I mean it—I mean it."'

In reality one can of course now see signs of the real artist even in the *Le Morte d'Arthur* series. For example, the true Beardsley type of woman appears in the design entitled 'How Queen Guenever made her a Nun.' These Beardsley women, Wilde hinted, were first

invented by the artist and then copied by nature. They have, indeed, been the cause of much fine writing, one androgynist describing them as the fruit of a French bagnio and a Chinese visitor. As Pierre Caume demanded of Félicien Rops we are moved to ask of Beardsley :

> Quels éclairs ont nimbé tes fillettes pâlies ?
> Quel stupre assez pervers, quel amour devasté
> Met des reflets d'absinthe en leurs melancolies ?

They belong to the same world as the women of Toulouse Lautrec, Rops, Odélon Redon, Bayros, and Rassenfosse—the type known as *la loupeuse insatiable et cupide.* They move and have their being in French erotica and novels like *La Faustine.*

Beardsley had now (1896) reached his best period with *The Rape of the Lock* and *The Lysistrata* of Aristophanes, and of the two the palm should be awarded to the eight designs of the latter work. No one has yet dared to say that these are probably his masterpieces ; but some day, when the kinship between Beardsley and those old Greek Masters who designed their exquisite vases and wine cups is established, this truism may also come to light. It is unlikely, however, to become revealed until

Aristophanes himself is fully translated in the vulgar tongue, for not even the most generous Editor in his monumental edition has essayed that impertinence to Mrs. Grundy. The illustrations or rather critical decorations of Beardsley are also not likely to become generally circulated to all because of their frankness. For phallism is purely pornographic if it has nothing to do with your subject. But unfortunately it is a considerable factor in the *Lysistrata*, as every scholar knows. Beardsley himself in his letters lays considerable emphasis on the fact that he was illustrating Aristophanes and not Donnay's French version of the same. And never was he more cynical or more incisive; never did he use fewer lines with more effect; never was love and its depravities more scathingly or so disdainfully ridiculed. In all there were eight drawings issued with a variant of the third, though I have reason to believe there was also a ninth, and even this, his worst erotic drawing, has nothing to do with obscenity. He had learned too much from the men who designed the old Hellenic pottery to be obscene. He was frank as Chaucer is frank, not vicious as Aretino delighted to be, or indecent like the English artists Rowlandson

and James Gillray were in some of their fantasies. Virgil dying wanted to destroy his Æneids, and Beardsley *in articulo mortis* wrote 'to destroy all copies of *Lysistrata* and bawdy drawings.' Yet he has nothing to fear from the genuine issue of those drawings that remain, or from the numberless pirated copies that have since exuded mysteriously into places like Charing Cross Road. Even Fuchs in his *Erotische Kunst* has to say: 'Beardsley is specially to be noticed for the refinement of his conceptions, his ultra-modern culture, his taste, his sense of proportion, his maturity of execution. No harsh or discordant notes, no violent tones. On the contrary, a wheedling finesse. In some respects he is the "maladive" beauty of our time incarnate.' Beardsley, indeed, never descended to the horrors of an Alfred Kubin or to the tone of certain of Bayros's designs. He was neither immoral nor moral, but unmoral like Rassenfosse or any one else who has not a fixed ethical theory to teach. In his Juvenal drawings (1897), his five Lucian sketches (1894), and the *Lysistrata* (1896) he went straight to the great gifts of classical literature, and in touching classical things he took on the ancient outlook via,

I believe, those wonderful Greek vase designers[1] which he, so assiduous a haunter of the British Museum, must have not only seen, but revelled in. But of these the best and freest are the *Lysistrata* conceptions; and to enjoy these one needs an initiation that is not every man's to receive.

We are, however, more interested here with the literary side of his work, which divides itself into poetry and prose. As a poet Beardsley has been accused of over-cleverness. Whatever that criticism means I do not know. Probably it implies some similar reflection to the statement that a dandy is over-dressed. I cannot, however, discover any such affectation in, for example, that charming poem, *The Three Musicians*, which recounts how the soprano 'lightly frocked,' the slim boy who dies 'for réclame and recall at Paris,' and the Polish pianist, pleased with their thoughts, their breakfast, and the summer day, wend their way 'along the path that skirts the wood':

[1] Ross says in his *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 45, one of the events which contributed 'to give Beardsley a fresh impetus and stimulate his method of expression' about the *Salomé* time was 'a series of visits to the collection of Greek vases in the British Museum (prompted by an essay of Mr. D. S. MacColl).'

The Polish genius lags behind,
And, with some poppies in his hand,
Picks out the strings and wood and wind
Of an imaginary band.
Enchanted that for once his men obey his beat and understand.

The charming cantatrice reclines
And rests a moment where she sees
Her château's roof that hotly shines
Amid the dusky summer trees,
And fans herself, half shuts her eyes, and smooths the frock about her knees.

The gracious boy is at her feet,
And weighs his courage with his chance;
His fears soon melt in noonday heat.
The tourist gives a furious glance,
Red as his guide-book, moves on, and offers up a prayer for France.

In *The Ballad of a Barber*, again, there is nothing but a trill of song in limpid verse. How Carrousel, the barber of Meridian Street, who could 'curl wit into the dullest face,' became *fou* of the thirteen-year-old King's daughter, so that

His fingers lost their cunning quite,
His ivory combs obeyed no more;

is a typical ninety *jeu d'esprit*, only much better done than the average one. With the fewest words Beardsley can sketch a scene or character, as he used the fewest of lines in

his drawings. This is even better exemplified in his prose. Time and again a single sentence of *Under the Hill* gives us a complete picture:

> Sporion was a tall, depraved young man, with a slight stoop, a troubled walk, an oval, impassible face, with its olive skin drawn lightly over the bone, strong, scarlet lips, long Japanese eyes, and a great gilt toupet.

We seem to gaze with the Abbé Fanfreluche at the prints on his bedroom wall:

> Within the delicate curved frames lived the corrupt and gracious creatures of Dorat and his school, slender children in masque and domino, smiling horribly, exquisite lechers leaning over the shoulders of smooth, doll-like girls, and doing nothing in particular, terrible little Pierrots posing as lady lovers and pointing at something outside the picture, and unearthly fops and huge, bird-like women mingling in some rococo room.

One rubs one's eyes. Are these not the drawings Franz von Bayros of Vienna realised later? But Beardsley's output of both prose and verse is actually so limited that one cannot compare his double art work to that of an artist like Rossetti. When all is said and done, his great literary work is the unfinished 'fairy' tale of *Under the Hill*. In its complete form it belongs to the class of works like Casanova's

Mémoires, the *Reigen* of Schnitzler, the novels of Restif de la Bretonne, and some of the *Thousand and One Nights*. It is an enchanting book in the same way as *Mademoiselle de Maupin* or *Le Roi Pausole* are enchanting books. In its rococo style it surpasses the best rhythms of Wilde, who only succeeds in cataloguing long lists of beautiful things, while Aubrey Beardsley suggests more than he says in the true impressionist way of all the writers of the nineties. Indeed, the purple patches of Beardsley are as rich in fine phrases as any paragraphs of the period—as *faisandée* as any French writer has written. Elizabethan euphuists, Restoration conceit-makers, later Latins with all the rich byzantium *florœ* of brains like Apuleius, can make as finely-sounding phrases, but I doubt whether they can pack away in them as rich a pictorial glamour as many of the writers of the nineties, and Beardsley amongst them, achieved. We have Helen in 'a flutter of frilled things' at 'tapertime' before her mirror displaying her neck and shoulders 'so wonderfully drawn,' and her 'little malicious breasts . . . full of the irritation of loveliness that can never be entirely comprehended, or ever enjoyed to the utmost.' Whole scenes of the book are unrolled before

us like priceless tapestries. The '*ombre* gateway of the mysterious hill' stands before us:

The place where he stood waved drowsily with strange flowers, heavy with perfume, dripping with odours. Gloomy and nameless weeds not to be found in Mentzelius. Huge moths, so richly winged they must have banqueted upon tapestries and royal stuffs, slept on the pillars that flanked either side of the gateway, and the eyes of all the moths remained open and were burning and bursting with a mesh of veins. The pillars were fashioned in some pale stone, and rose up like hymns in the praise of pleasure, for from cap to base each one was carved with loving sculptures . . .

To read *The Toilet of Helen*, with its faint echoes perhaps of Max Beerbohm's 'Toilet of Sabina' in *The Perversion of Rouge*, is to be lured on by the sound of the sentences:

Before a toilet-table that shone like the altar of Nôtre Dame des Victoires, Helen was seated in a little dressing-gown of black and heliotrope. The Coiffeur Cosmé was caring for her scented chevelure, and with tiny silver tongs, warm from the caresses of the flame, made delicious intelligent curls that fell as lightly as a breath about her forehead and over her eyebrows, and clustered like tendrils round her neck. Her three favourite girls, Pappelarde, Blanchemains, and Loureyne, waited immediately upon her with perfume and powder in delicate flaçons and frail cassolettes, and

held in porcelain jars the ravishing paints prepared by Châteline for those cheeks and lips which had grown a little pale with anguish of exile. Her three favourite boys, Claud, Clair, and Sarrasins, stood amorously about with salver, fan, and napkin. Millamant held a slight tray of slippers, Minette some tender gloves, La Popelinière—mistress of the robes—was ready with a frock of yellow and yellow. La Zambinella bore the jewels, Florizel some flowers, Amadour a box of various pins, and Vadius a box of sweets. Her doves, ever in attendance, walked about the room that was panelled with the gallant paintings of Jean Baptiste Dorat, and some dwarfs and doubtful creatures sat here and there lolling out their tongues, pinching each other, and behaving oddly enough.

There you have a Beardsley drawing transfused into words. The same is true of his description of the woods of Auffray. The same is true of the wonderful supper served on the terrace to Helen and her guests amid the gardens. To find such another supper in literature one has to turn to some French author, or, better still, to the 'Cena Trimalchionis' of Petronius himself. From this it will be seen that Beardsley's literary work,[1]

[1] In *The Influence of Baudelaire in France and England*, by G. Turquet-Milnes, pp. 277–280 (1913), there is an interesting study of his Baudelairism.

like his black-and-white, though the embodiment of the spirit of his age, is also of the noble order of the highest things in art. It is for this reason, indeed, that I have selected Beardsley as the centre-piece of this brief sketch of a movement that is dead and gone. He was the incarnation of the spirit of the age; but, when the fall of Wilde killed the age and the Boer War buried it, neither of these things disturbed or changed the magic spell of his art. His age may die, but he remains. Even now he has outlived the fad period, while many of the books that were written at that date by others and decorated by him are only valuable to-day because of his frontispiece or wrapper. One has not forgotten those wrappers, for as one will not forget the work of William Blake, one will not forget that of Aubrey Beardsley. His enthusiasts treasure the smallest fragment.

II

Like all artistic and literary movements this one had, in the shape of various periodicals, its manifestoes. In fact, it was a period particularly rich in this kind of fruit. In *The Hobby Horse* the voices of the new spirit were mingled for the first time with those of the past. There were, among other magazines, *The Rose Leaf*, *The Chameleon*, *The Spirit Lamp*, *The Pageant*, *The Evergreen*, *The Parade*, *The Quarto*, *The Dome*, *The Chord*, while among the popular papers *The Idler*, *To-Day*, and *Pick-me-Up* produced the work of men like Edgar Wilson and S. H. Sime; and, further, *The Butterfly*, *The Poster*, and *The Studio* must be carefully studied for the tendencies of the time. But the two principal organs of the movement were, beyond all doubt, *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy*. Round them, as around the shrines of old beside the Ægean, gather the faithful and the chosen. In the other publications there was too much jostling with the profane, but here '*Procul profani*.' It will be

well, therefore, although it has been done more or less before, to study these two magazines in some detail, and also their literary editors who gathered the clan together. In both cases Beardsley was the art editor, though he was 'fired,' to put it plainly, from *The Yellow Book* after its fourth number. His influence, therefore, permeated both. In fact, he made them both works of value for the coming generations, and particularly in the case of *The Savoy* he bore the burden of the day and saved the monthly from fatuity. When he leaves *The Yellow Book* it will be found to be never the same. When he is too ill to be active in *The Savoy* it becomes very small beer. So interwoven with the lives and values of these publications is the genius of Beardsley that one cannot speak of the one without referring to the other. Of Beardsley himself I have already spoken, so I propose to confine myself strictly to the art editor, while dealing first with *The Yellow Book* and its literary editor, Henry Harland, and then with *The Savoy* and Mr. Arthur Symons.

The publisher, Mr. John Lane, says[1] this much-discussed *Yellow Book* was founded one

[1] In his pamphlet, *Aubrey Beardsley and The Yellow Book*, p. 1. 1903.

morning during half-an-hour's chat over cigarettes, at the Hogarth Club, by himself, Beardsley, and Henry Harland. While he states that 'Mr. Harland had the faculty of getting the best from his contributors,' the publisher goes on to add: 'Beardsley's defect as art editor was youth. He would not take himself seriously; as an editor and draughtsman he was almost a practical joker, for one had, so to speak, to place his drawings under a microscope and look at them upside down. This tendency, on the eve of the production of Volume V., during my first visit to the United States, rendered it necessary to omit his work from that volume.' Looking back on this, all that one can say now is that although Beardsley may have been trying, after all, he and not the publisher was *The Yellow Book*, and with his departure the spirit of the age slowly volatilised from the work until it deteriorated into a kind of dull keepsake of the Bodley Head. There were thirteen numbers in all, and Beardsley actually art-edited the first four. In the charming prospectus for the fifth volume he is still described as art editor, and four Beardsleys were to have appeared in it: 'Frontispiece to the Chopin Nocturnes,' 'Atalanta,' 'Black Coffee,' and the portrait of Miss Letty Lind in

'An Artist's Model.' However, the break came, and Beardsley had no further connection, unfortunately, with the fifth volume.

The first number, as in the case of so many similar periodicals, was brilliant. The standard set was too high, indeed, to last, and to the staid English literary press of the time it was something of a seven days' wonder. *The Times* described its note as a 'combination of English rowdyism and French lubricity.' *The Westminster Gazette* asked for a 'short Act of Parliament to make this kind of thing illegal.' Above all, the whole rabble descends howling on the art editor. It is Beardsley that annoys them, proving how he stands out at once beyond his comrades. Against the literary editor, Henry Harland, nothing is said; but the press are full of the offences of one Beardsley.

As Mr. J. M. Kennedy, in his *English Literature, 1880–1905*, has devoted an admirable, if somewhat scornful, chapter to the contents of *The Yellow Book*, it is to Henry Harland, who seems to have merited all the charming things said about him, that I would now direct attention.

A delicate valetudinarian always in search of health, he was born at Petrograd in March,

1861. He commenced life in the surrogate of New York State, whither his parents removed, writing in his spare time in the eighties, under the *nom-de-plume* of Sidney Luska, sketches of American Jewish life. Like Theodore Peters, Whistler, and Henry James, he could not, however, resist the call of the Old World, and he was at journalistic work in London when he was made editor of *The Yellow Book*. Besides his editorial duties he was a regular contributor, not only writing the series of notes signed 'The Yellow Dwarf,' but also turning out a number of short stories. But London was only to be a haven of brief sojourn for this writer, whose health sent him south to Italy. Perhaps his best work in the nineties was his short story *Mademoiselle Miss*, while later in Italy he opened up a new vein of dainty comedy fiction in almost rose-leaf prose with *The Cardinal's Snuff-Box* (1900), whose happy delicacy of thought and style he never equalled again, but was always essaying to repeat until death carried him off in Italy. Although, therefore, sitting in the editorial chair at the Bodley Head, Harland can only be said to have been a bird of passage in the nineties, and not one of its pillars like Arthur Symons of *The Savoy*.

This later publication was started as a rival

to *The Yellow Book* soon after Beardsley gave up the art-editing of the earlier periodical. In 1895, when 'Symons and Dowson, Beardsley and Conder, were all together on a holiday at Dieppe . . . it was there, in a cabaret Mr. Sickert has repeatedly painted, that *The Savoy* was originated.'[1] It was issued by Leonard Smithers, the most extraordinary publisher, in some respects, of the nineties, a kind of modern Cellini, who produced some wonderfully finely printed books, and was himself just as much a part of the movement as any of its numerous writers. Indeed, no survey of the period can be complete without a brief consideration of this man.

But to return to *The Savoy*, it can be aptly described as the fine flower of the publications of the age. It is true *The Yellow Book* outlived it, but never did the gospel of the times flourish so exceedingly as in its pages. Here we see that violent love for a strangeness of proportion in art that was the keynote of the age. Here the abnormal, the bizarre, found their true home, and poetry is the pursuit of the unattainable by the exotic. It will, therefore, not perhaps be out of place before dealing

[1] W. G. Blaikie Murdoch's *Renaissance of the Nineties*, p. 21. 1911.

with its literary editor, Mr. Arthur Symons, to discuss the eight numbers that appeared. Number one (printed by H. S. Nichols) appeared as a quarterly in boards in January, 1896. An editorial note by Arthur Symons, which originally appeared as a prospectus, hoped that *The Savoy* would prove 'a periodical of an exclusively literary and artistic kind. . . . All we ask from our contributors is good work, and good work is all we offer our readers. . . . We have not invented a new point of view. We are not Realists, or Romanticists, or Decadents. For us, all art is good which is good art.' The contents of the number included a typical Shaw article, full, like all of his work, of the obvious in the terms of the scandalous; some short stories by Wedmore, Dowson, Rudolf Dircks, Humphrey James, and Yeats. The other articles were hardly very original; but the contributions of Beardsley dwarf everything else. He towers out above all else with his illustrations, his poem *The Three Musicians*, and the beginning of his romantic story *Under the Hill*.

Number two (April, 1896, printed by the Chiswick Press) had another editorial note courageously thanking the critics of the Press for their reception of the first number, which

'has been none the less flattering because it has been for the most part unfavourable.' The contents included poems and stories by Symons, Dowson, and Yeats, while John Gray and Selwyn Image have poems and Wedmore a story. Beardsley continues his romance, and lifts the number out of the rut with his Wagneresque designs. Max Beerbohm caricatures him, and Shannon and Rothenstein are represented. Among articles there is a series on Verlaine; and Vincent O'Sullivan, in a paper 'On the Kind of Fiction called Morbid,' sounds a note of the group with his conclusion: 'Let us cling by all means to our George Meredith, our Henry James . . . but then let us try, if we cannot be towards others, unlike these, if not encouraging, at the least not actively hostile and harassing when they go out in the black night to follow their own sullen will-o'-the-wisps.' He is also to be thanked for registering the too little known name of the American, Francis Saltus.

Number three (July, 1896) appeared in paper covers, and *The Savoy* becomes a monthly instead of a quarterly from now on. There is a promise, unfulfilled, of the serial publication of George Moore's new novel, *Evelyn Innes*. Yeats commences three articles on *William*

Blake and his Illustrations to the 'Divine Comedy,' and Hubert Crackanthorpe contributes one of his best short stories. Owing to illness Beardsley's novel stops publication, but his *Ballad of a Barber* relieves the monotony of some dull stuff by the smaller men. The reproductions of Blake's illustrations are made to fill the art gap of Beardsley, who has only two black-and-whites in. The publication of his novel in book form is promised when the artist is well enough.

Number four (August, 1896) at once reveals the effect of Beardsley's inactivity through illness, and shows that Beardsley is *The Savoy*, and all else but leather and prunella. The number, however, is saved by a story of Dowson, *The Dying of Francis Donne*, and on the art side a frontispiece for Balzac's *La Fille aux Yeux d'Or*, by Charles Conder, is interesting.

Number five (September, 1896) is for some unaccountable reason the hardest number to procure. Besides the cover and title-page it contains only one Beardsley, *The Woman in White*, but the cover is an exceptionally beautiful Beardsley, the two figures in the park holding a *colloque sentimental* seem to have stepped out of the pages of Verlaine's poem. Theodore Wratislaw and Ernest Rhys con-

tribute the stories. Dowson, Yeats, and the Canadian, Bliss Carman, contribute the best of the poetry.

Number six (October, 1896), has a very poor art side, with the exception of Beardsley's familiar *The Death of Pierrot*. The literary contents consists chiefly of the editor. One notices the periodical is dying. The only unique feature is a story, *The Idiots*, by Conrad, and Dowson is still faithful with a poem.

Number seven (November, 1896) announces in a leaflet (dated October) the death of *The Savoy* in the next number. The editorial note states that the periodical 'has, in the main, conquered the prejudices of the press . . . it has not conquered the general public, and, without the florins of the general public, no magazine . . . can expect to pay its way.' In this number Beardsley returns to attempt to salve it with his remarkable translation of Catullus: Carmen CI., and illustration thereto. Yeats and Dowson contribute poems and Beardsley his Tristan and Isolde drawing.

Number eight (December, 1896) completes the issue. The whole of the literary contents is by the Editor and the art contents by Beardsley himself: in all fourteen drawings.

By way of epilogue, Symons says in their next venture, which is to appear twice a year, 'that they are going to make no attempt to be popular.' Unfortunately for English periodicals it was a venture never essayed.

That *The Savoy* is far truer to the period than *The Yellow Book* was perhaps in no small way due to the fact that Mr. Arthur Symons was its literary editor. For he at any rate in his strenuous search for an æsthetical solution for art and life, in his assiduous exploring in the Latin literatures for richer colours and stranger sensations—he, at any rate, has not only been the child of his time, but in some ways the father of it. His sincere love of art is beyond all question, and it has sent him into many strange byways. He has praised in purple prose the bird-like motions and flower-like colours of the ballet; he has taken us with him to Spanish music-halls and Sevillian Churches; he has garnered up carefully in English the myths of the symbolists and translated for us the enigmas of Mallarmé—*Herodias*, the blood and roses of D'Annunzio's plays and the throbbing violins of Verlaine's muse; he has taken us to continental cities, and with him we have heard Pachmann playing and seen the enchantments of the divine Duse. All the cults of the

Seven Arts has this Admirable Crichton of Æstheticism discussed. He has worked towards a theory of æsthetics. He has written charmingly (if somewhat temperamentally) of his comrades like Beardsley, Crackanthorpe and Dowson. He was a leader in the campaign of the early nineties, and his work will always be the guiding hand for those who come after him and who wish to speak of this movement. As early as 1893 he was writing of it as 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' in *Harper's*, when he speaks of the most representative work of the period: 'After a fashion it is no doubt a decadence; it has all the qualities that mark the end of great periods, the qualities that we find in the Greek, the Latin, decadence; an intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research, an over-subtilising refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity.' Perhaps, in a way, it is an immense pity that Symons will become the universal guide to the period, for it must be conceded that he has always been prone to find perversity in anything, as Sir Thomas Browne was haunted with quincunxes. But of the subtilty of his judgments and of the charming prose in which he labours to express them there can be no question. Listen, for example, when he speaks

of the aim of decadence: 'To fix the last fine shade, the quintessence of things; to fix it fleetingly; to be a disembodied voice, and yet the voice of a human soul; that is the ideal of decadence.' How beautifully it is said, so that one almost forgets how dangerous it is. Very aptly did Blaikie Murdoch say the Mantle of Pater fell on him. It is the same murmured litany of beautiful prose. Indeed Arthur Symons is the supreme type of *belles lettrist.* Just as in the early nineties he prided himself on the smell of patchouli about his verse, so he alone remains to-day with the old familiar scent about his writings of a period dead and gone which exacts rightfully our highest respect. As one owes him a debt of homage for his fine faithfulness to art, so one thinks of him, as he himself has written of Pater, as a 'personality withdrawn from action, which it despises or dreads, solitary with its ideals, in the circle of its "exquisite moments" in the Palace of Art, where it is never quite at rest.' How true that last phrase is, 'never quite at rest,' of the author. For to him Art is an escape—the supreme escape from life.

Arthur Symons began with a study on Browning and the volume *Days and Nights* when the eighties were still feeling their way

towards the nineties. It was in *Silhouettes* (1892) and *London Nights* (1895) that he appeared as perhaps the most *outré* member of the new movement. His perfection of technique in endeavouring to catch the fleeting impression by limiting it, never cataloguing it, marks the difference of his verse and that of the secession from much of the school of the eighties' definite listing of facts. Symons, indeed, is not only a poet impressionist, but also a critic impressionist in his critical works like *Studies in Two Literatures*, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, and so on. This impressionism, whilst it makes his verse so intangible and delicate, also endows his appreciations with a certain all-pervading subtlety. It is as though a poet had begun to see with the Monet vision his own poems. It is as though a man comes away with an impression and is content with that impression on which to base his judgment. It is New Year's Eve: the poet records his impression of the night:

> We heard the bells of midnight burying the year.
> Then the night poured its silent waters over us.
> And then in the vague darkness faint and tremulous,
> Time paused; then the night filled with sound; morning was here.

The poet is at the Alhambra or Empire Ballet: like an impressionist picture a poem disengages the last fine shade of the scene. He wanders at twilight in autumn through the mist-enfolded lanes:

> Night creeps across the darkening vale;
> On the horizon tree by tree
> Fades into shadowy skies as pale,
> As moonlight on a shadowy sea.

The vision remains like an etching. The poet is on the seashore at sunset:

> The sea lies quietest beneath
> The after-sunset flush,
> That leaves upon the heaped gray clouds
> The grape's faint purple blush.

It lingers like a water-colour in one's memory. He sees a girl at a restaurant and his poem is at once an impression as vivid as a painter's work. In a phrase he can cage a mood, in a quatrain a scene. Where does this ability come from? The answer is, perhaps, given by the one name Verlaine, whose genius Mr. Symons has done so much to hail.

In the gay days of the early nineties before black tragedy had clouded the heavens there was no more daring secessionist from the tedious old ways than the editor of *The Savoy*. To those days, like Dowson's lover of Cynara, he

has 'been faithful in his fashion.' If the interest is now not so vivid in his work it is because the centre of art has shifted. If Mr. Symons has not shifted his centre too, but remained faithful to the old dead Gods, it is no crime. It only means that we, when we wish to see him as one of the figures of his group, must shut up his volumes of criticism, forget his views on Toulouse Lautrec and Gerard Nerval, and William Blake, put aside his later verses and his widow's cruse of writer's recollections, and turn with assurance to the débonnaire poet of *Silhouettes* and *London Nights*.

It has been said that Mr. Symons stands for 'a Pagan revolt against Puritanism.' It is argued, because he was nurtured in nonconformity, art came to him with something of the hysteria a revelation comes to a revivalist meeting. This may be true, but I cannot help thinking that no writer amid all these French influences which he had so eagerly sought out yet remains so typical of the English spirit. It may be heresy, but I always see in mind the gaiety of a Nice carnival in a certain drawing with one solid, solemn face surveying the scene over a starched front. Beneath it is written: 'Find the Englishman.'

Like the American critic, James Huneker, Mr. Arthur Symons has also occasionally written short imaginative prose studies. One thinks, too, in this respect of Walter Pater's wonderful *Imaginary Portraits* and particularly his glorious study of Watteau, and I rather think that this success must have moved the spirit of the two later critics to a noble rivalry. The best, indeed, of Mr. Symons's *Spiritual Adventures* are probably those studies which are mostly attached to some theme of art which has been after all the all-engrossing motive of this delightful critic's life. *An Autumn City* and *The Death of Peter Waydelin*: the first, a sensitive's great love for Arles, whither he brings his unresponsive bride; the other, a study quaintly suggestive of a certain painter's life: both of these sketches are unquestionably more moving than Mr. Symons's studies of non-conformists quivering at the thought of hell-fire. To them one might add, perhaps, *Esther Kahn*, the history of the psychological development of an actress after the style of *La Faustine*.

Mr. Symons's favourite word is 'escape'; his favourite phrase 'escape from life.' Now the one and now the other reappear continually in all kinds of connections. Of John Addington

Symonds, for example, he writes: 'All his work was in part an escape, an escape from himself.' Of Ernest Dowson's indulgence in the squalid debaucheries of the Brussels kermesse he writes: 'It was his own way of escape from life.' Passages of like tenor abound in his writings; and, in one of his papers on *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, he explains his meaning more precisely:

> Our only chance, in this world, of a complete happiness, lies in the measure of our success in shutting the eyes of the mind, and deadening its sense of hearing, and dulling the keenness of its apprehension of the unknown.... As the present passes from us, hardly to be enjoyed except as memory or as hope, and only with an at best partial recognition of the uncertainty or inutility of both, it is with a kind of terror that we wake up, every now and then, to the whole knowledge of our ignorance, and to some perception of where it is leading us. To live through a single day with that overpowering consciousness of our real position, which, in the moments in which alone it mercifully comes, is like blinding light or the thrust of a flaming sword, would drive any man out of his senses.... And so there is a great silent conspiracy between us to forget death; all our lives are spent in busily forgetting death. That is why we are so active about so many things which we know to be unimportant, why we are so afraid of solitude, and so thankful for the

company of our fellow creatures. Allowing ourselves for the most part to be vaguely conscious of that great suspense in which we live, we find our escape from its sterile, annihilating reality, in many dreams, in religion, passion, art; each a forgetfulness, each a symbol of creation.... Each is a kind of sublime selfishness, the saint, the lover, and the artist having each an incommunicable ecstasy which he esteems as his ultimate attainment; however, in his lower moments, he may serve God in action, or do the will of his mistress, or minister to men by showing them a little beauty. But it is before all things an escape.

Mr. Symons finds in his system of æsthetics an escape from Methodism and the Calvinistic threatenings of his childhood. He wishes to escape 'hell.' In the story of *Seaward Lackland* there is a preacher whom Methodism drove to madness. Mr. Symons has turned to Art so that he may not feel the eternal flames taking hold of him.

III

One endeavours to remember some one or two outstanding novels written by any one of the writers of this group. It must be at once admitted, one fails to recall a great novel. It is true that the great Victorians, Meredith and Hardy, were hard at work at this time; but, then, neither of these writers belongs to this movement. Then there was Kipling, Stevenson, Barrie, and George Moore. With the exception of the last, we have little to do with these here. They do not come within the scope of the present study.

None of the men of the nineties (as I have defined them) produced a great novel. It would be well, however, to give at once some connotation for so loose a term as 'a great novel.' Let us then say that a good English novel is not necessarily a great novel; nor, for that matter, is a good Russian novel necessarily a great novel. A great novel is a work of fiction that has entered into the realm of universal literature in the same way as the dramas

of Sophocles and Shakespeare and Molière have entered that glorious demesne. As a matter of fact, one can remember, I think in most cases, very few English novels that are great in this sense; while there are many more French and Russian works that have an undeniable right to this title. Therefore it is not, perhaps, so damaging a criticism of the period as it might at first sight appear to say it has produced no great novel.

But in so far as English fiction alone is concerned, it cannot be said that the men of the nineties produced work of a very high order in this form. They do not seem to have had the staying power demanded in such artistic production. The short poem, the short story, the small black and white drawing, the one act play—in fact, any form of art that just displays the climacteric moment and discards the rest pleased them. It was, as John Davidson said, an age of Bovril. While the novel, it must be admitted, needs either a profusion of ideas, as in the case of the Russians, or of genitals, as in the case of the French. But the art of the nineties was essentially an expression of moods—and moods, after all, are such evanescent brief conditions. So it is not unnatural that the fruition of the novel was not rich

among these writers. George Gissing and George Moore, in a way their forebears (I have in mind more particularly the latter), spread a taste for such works. Indeed, in his *Confessions of a Young Man*, George Moore may be said to have predicted the masculine type of the nineties. Gissing in 1891 was to daunt some with his *New Grub Street*, while Henry James was to inspire enthusiasm in a few like Hubert Crackanthorpe. But naturally in the way of stimulus the main goad was France, which was at that date phenomenally rich in practitioners of the art of the novel. The Vizetelly Zolas, Mr. George Moore personally conducting the novels of certain of the French novelists over the Channel, the desire to smash the fetters of Victorian fiction which Thomas Hardy was to accomplish, were all inspiring sources which were, however, singularly unfruitful. Walter Pater long before in his academic romance *Marius*, which they had all read eagerly, wrote charmingly of a field that would appeal to them when he said: 'Life in modern London . . . is stuff sufficient for the fresh imagination of a youth to build his "palace of art" of.' But instead of taking the recommendation of this high priest they read *Dorian Gray*, which Wilde would never have written if Huysmans had not

first written *A Rebours*. The young men of Henley, it must be confessed, did far finer work than Richard Le Gallienne's watery Wildism in *The Quest of the Golden Girl*. George Moore wrote a masterpiece in *Evelyn Innes*, but Ernest Dowson and Arthur Moore in *A Comedy of Masks* and *Adrian Rome* did not retaliate. Leonard Merrick, who started publishing in the eighties, did not publish his best work till the nineties were dead and gone; while his best Bohemian Paris stories may owe as much to Du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894) as they do to Henri Murger. Henry Harland, as I have already said, only struck his vein of comedy fiction when the Boer War had finished the movement. George Gissing and Arthur Morrison belong, with Frank Harris, to the pugilistic school of Henley's young men, while Richard Whiteing, who turned from journalism to write *No. 5 John Street* (1899), was too old a man and too late with his book to belong to the nineties' group. Arthur Machen, in those days, belonged to the short story writers with Hubert Crackanthorpe, who was the great imaginative prose writer of the group. The sailor, Joseph Conrad, the Australian Louis Becke, the Canadian, C. G. D. Roberts, were working out their own salvation,

and had nothing to do with the Rhymers' Club. The strong creative brain of Aubrey Beardsley, indeed, in his unfinished picaresque romance, *Under the Hill*, which I have already mentioned, produced something new, but it was not a novel; while it is John Davidson's poetry that counts, not his novels, which remain unread nowadays on the shelf.

Indeed, if the name of a good English novel by any one of them is demanded, it will be singularly difficult to suggest a satisfactory title. One can even go further, and state that they did not even have one amongst them who has handed on to us a vivid picture of their own lives in the form of fiction. Dowson, indeed, in the dock life of his books may have autobiographical touches, but they are purely personal. What I mean is, that there was no one standing by to give us a picture of them as Willy, the French writer, has given us of the sceptical yet juvenile enthusiasm of Les Jeunes of Paris of the same period in, for example, his *Maîtresse d'Esthètes*. What is cruder than Ranger-Gull's *The Hypocrite*, which has pretensions to be a picture of the young men of the period? And when one comes to think of it this is a great pity, as an excellent novel might have been penned around the feverish activities of

these young exotics of the nineties. Robert Hichens' *Green Carnation* is, after all, perhaps the most brilliant attempt to picture the weaknesses of the period, and it is merely a skit taking off in the characters of Esmé Amarinth and Lord Reggie two well-known personalities. *The Adventures of John Johns*, it is true, is supposed to be the history of the rise of one of the smaller epigoni of the movement, but it is not a very brilliant achievement, though it has considerable merit and interest. One cannot indeed say that it is up to the standard of Ernest La Jeunesse's *Odin Howes*, wherein the French Jew has given a veritable flashing insight on the last days of Wilde in Paris and those holes into which he crept to drink. What a pity, indeed, an English contemporary has not done the same for the Tite Street days, or given us in his book a serious study of the strange world of Whistler or Dowson.

In the face of this strange dearth of novels in this school one cannot help asking the reasons that engendered it. Without laying down any hard and fast rules, it will, I think, be seen that this vacuity came from the Zeitgeist of the group itself. As has been said, the large canvas, the five-act play, the long novel were *démodé* for the period. The age

demanded, after the long realistic studies of the eighties in France, the climacteric moments only when the passions of the *personæ* of the drama were at white heat, so to speak, and life was lived intensely. Could not the great scene up to which the five long acts lead be squeezed into one? Was not the rediscovery of the Mimes of Herodias a sign of the times? Could not the great beauty of an immense landscape's spirit be caught and seized on a small canvas? Could not the long-winded novel of three tomes be whittled down to the actual short-story motive? This reduction of everything to its climax can be seen in all the art of the period. Look at Beardsley's decoration for Wilde's *Salomé*, entitled itself 'The Climax.' Conder paints small objects like fans and diminutive water-colours and Crackanthorpe writes short stories. The poems of Dowson are short swallow flights of song, and the epic is reduced to Stephen Phillips's *Marpessa*. The one-act play begins on the Continent to make a big appeal for more recognition than that of a curtain-raiser. Small theatres, particularly in Germany and Austria, give evening performances consisting of one-acters alone. It becomes the same in music. The age was short-winded and its art,

to borrow a phrase from the palæstra, could only stay over short distances. So, whereas there is a strange dearth of novels, the men of the nineties were very fruitful in short stories. In fact, it would not be perhaps too much to say that it was then, for the first time in English literature, the short story came into its own. At any rate, it would be more judicious to put the period as one in which the short story flourished vigorously (if not for the first time), in England, as a 'theme of art.' To understand exactly what I mean by this artistic treatment of the short story[1] as a medium of literary expression, all that is necessary is, perhaps, to compare one of Dickens's short tales, for example, with one of Stevenson's short stories. The result is apparent at once in the difference of treatment—a difference as essential as the difference between the effect of a figure in stone and another in bronze. The earlier tale has none of the facets and subtleties that art has contrived to express by the latter narration. This artistic treatment of the short story by Englishmen, then, was a new thing and a good thing for English

[1] Frederick Wedmore in *On Books and Arts* (1899) discusses the short story as a distinct artistic medium. It can never be a 'novel in a nutshell.'

literature. If the long staying pow rs required for the great novel in the world of comparative literature did not belong to the writers of the nineties group, at any rate they developed, more or less artistically, the climacteric effects of the *conte*. For the short story crossed the Channel by means of Guy de Maupassant, and out of it arose on this side for a brief decade or so a wonderful wealth of art. The short stories of Kipling are by no means the only pebbles on the beach. In fact, never even in France itself was there such variety of theme and treatment. The successful short stories of the period are of all sorts and conditions. To exemplify as briefly as possible this variety is perhaps closer to my purpose than to waste time in proving such obvious facts as the anxious endeavours of all these writers to raise their work to the artistic elevation demanded of the short story, or their strenuous struggle to attain a suitable style and treatment for their themes.

Numerous examples of their art at once crowd the mind, such as Ernest Dowson's *Dying of Francis Donne*, Max Beerbohm's *Happy Hypocrite*, Frederick Wedmore's tender *Orgeas and Miradou*, Arthur Symons's *Death of Peter Waydelin*, the works of Hubert

Crackanthorpe, or the fantastic tales of Arthur Machen, or Eric Count Stenbock's[1] *Studies of Death*. H. D. Lowry, though of Henley's young men, works at the same art of studies in sentiment in his *Women's Tragedies*. So does Mr. G. S. Street in his *Episodes* and George Egerton in her *Discords* and *Keynotes*. Among the others who deliberately tried to write the short story as an artistic theme at that period and who were at the same time in the movement can be mentioned Henry Harland, Rudolf Dircks in his *Verisimilitudes*, Richard Le

[1] Eric Stenbock was at Balliol, Oxford. He collaborated in a volume of translations of Balzac's 'Short Stories.' He contributed to Lord Alfred Douglas's *The Spirit Lamp*. As a specimen of his style the following extract from his short story, *The Other Side*, may be offered. It is supposed to be an old Breton woman's description of the Black Mass:

'Then when they get to the top of the hill, there is an altar with six candles quite black and a sort of something in between, that nobody sees quite clearly, and the old black ram with the man's face and long horns begins to say Mass in a sort of gibberish nobody understands, and two black strange things like monkeys glide about with the book and the cruets—and there's music too, such music. There are things the top half like black cats, and the bottom part like men only their legs are all covered with close black hair, and they play on the bag-pipes, and when they come to the elevation then—. Amid the old crones there was lying on the hearth-rug, before the fire, a boy whose large lovely eyes dilated and whose limbs quivered in the very ecstacy of terror.'

Gallienne, Kenneth Grahame, Percy Hemingway in his *Out of Egypt*, etc. Then we have men like R. B. Cunninghame Graham and H. W. Nevinson, clearly influenced by the movement and writing alongside of it of the ends of the earth they have visited. The former, for example, in a short story like *Aurora La Cujiñi* (Smithers, 1898) clearly reflects the influences of this period which gloried in the abnormal in Art. Known as a socialist of courage, Mr. Graham, whose name betrays his origin, has also visited many of the exotic places of the world. In his able book *Mogreb-el-Acksa* he has given us vignettes of Morocco that are unsurpassed; in his volume *Success* he has told us of those Spanish-speaking races of South America, of the tango, and the horses of the pampas, and the estancias he knows so well. In *Aurora La Cujiñi* we have a vignette of Seville so realistic that we almost believe that one is justified in considering that there is just enough motive in it to vivify it with the quickening touch of the short story-teller's wand. It is slow in starting, but when this motive comes suddenly at the end we are almost left breathless, realising that everything that went before was but a slow, ruthless piling up of local colour. It is all

done with such deliberate deftness. How we see the scenes unrolling slowly before us. Like the thrilled people on the benches we watch the Toreador about to make his kill as we read:

'The "espada" had come forward, mumbled his boniment in Andaluz, swung his montera over his shoulder upon the ground, and after sticking his sword in every quarter of the bull had butchered him at last amid the applause of the assembled populace. Blood on the sand; sun on the white plaza; upon the women's faces "cascarilla"; scarlet and yellow fans, and white mantillas with "fleco y alamares" in the antique style . . .; women selling water, calling out "aguá!" in so guttural a voice it seemed like Arabic; Cardobese hats, short jackets, and from the plaza a scent of blood and sweat acting like a rank aphrodisiac upon the crowd, and making the women squeeze each other's sweating hands, and look ambiguously at one another, as they were men; and causing the youths, with swaying hips and with their hair cut low upon their foreheads, to smile with open lips and eyes that met your glance, as they had been half women. Blood, harlotry, sun, gay colours, flowers and waving palm-trees, women with roses stuck behind their ears,

mules covered up in harness of red worsted, cigar girls, gipsies, tourists, soldiers, and the little villainous-looking urchins, who, though born old, do duty as children in the South.'

As we read this magical evocation of the spirit of place we rub our eyes and ask ourselves have we not been there. This prose of vivid impressionism is the goal of one and all. As the plein air school painted in the open air before Nature, so these men must write as closely round their subject as actual experience can allow them. The vivid realisation of a mood, as we shall see in Hubert Crackanthorpe, is the desired prize. Turn through the pages of Ernest Dowson's *Dilemmas*, and read, above all, *A Case of Conscience;* leaf Frederick Wedmore's[1] *Renunciations*, and pause over *The*

[1] About the worst of Frederick Wedmore's short stories, such as *The North Coast and Eleanor*, there is a hint of the melodrama of Hugh Conway's *Called Back*, but it is a feeble replica of the original. The most successful of his short imaginative pieces, as the author rightly terms them, on the other hand, have a refined grace of slow movement that is at once captivating and refreshing. It seems impossible that the same man could have essayed both the worst and the best. As a specimen of the latter type of work, let me fasten on to the description of the entourage of Pelse the chemist, the man with the tastes above his position :

'There came a little snow. But in the parlour over the shop—with the three windows closely curtained—one

Chemist in the Suburbs, wherein, as H. D. Traill said, the story of Richard Pelse's life is a pure joy; in both cases vivid impressionism and mood realisation are the keynotes of the work. To understand these tendencies better and the excellence of the work achieved, it will be more advantageous, perhaps, to consider in more detail one writer only who carried the charm of the prose pen to a higher degree of emphasis and finish in the short story than any of the others, to wit, Hubert Crackanthorpe.

A curious anomaly can be remarked here, that in this period the great work of prose fiction was not to be resharpened by the young men to nearly the same extent as they resharpened the poetry and the essay. None

could have forgetfulness of weather. There was the neat fireplace; the little low tea-table; a bookcase in which Pelse—before that critical event at Aix-les-Bains—had been putting, gradually, first editions of the English poets; a cabinet of china, in which—but always before Aix-les-Bains—he had taken to accumulate some pretty English things of whitest paste or finest painting; a Worcester cup, with its exotic birds, its lasting gold, its scale-blue ground, like lapis lazuli or sapphire; a Chelsea figure; something from Swansea; white plates of Nantgarw, bestrewn with Billingsley's greyish pink roses, of which he knew the beauty, the free artistic touch. How the things had lost interest for him! "From the moment," says some French critic, "that a woman occupies me, my collection does not exist." And many a woman may lay claim to occupy a French art critic; only one had occupied Richard Pelse.'

approach Meredith and Hardy, who move like Titans of the age, while Kipling and Crackanthorpe are the only two young men that give any quantity of imaginative prose work of a high new order (and in saying this one must not overlook Arthur Morrison's *Mean Streets*, or Zangwill's Ghetto Tales, or the work of Henry James) until Conrad came from the sea and Louis Becke from Australia to give new vistas to our fiction. But it is not with them we are concerned here, but with Hubert Crackanthorpe,[1] of whose life the poet has sung:

> Too rough his sea, too dark its angry tides!
> Things of a day are we, shadows that move
> The lands of shadow.

Crackanthorpe commenced his literary career as the editor, with W. H. Wilkins, of *The Albemarle*, a monthly review started in January, 1892, with a splendid supplement lithograph.

Wreckage, the younger writer's first volume, appeared in 1893, and contains seven studies of very unequal merit. Its French inspiration as well as its French emulation is at once apparent,

[1] It is interesting to note the verses also of the French poet Francis Jammes dedicated to Crackanthorpe. Jammes lived at Orthez when Crackanthorpe visited that remote countryside.

for in place of a foreword is the simple, all-sufficing French quotation as a keynote of the type of work displayed: 'Que le roman ait cette religion que le siècle passé appelait de ce large et vaste nom: "Humanité";—il lui suffit de cette conscience; son droit est là.' The youth of the writer (he was only twenty-eight) must be remembered when discussing the inequality of these studies in passion, for all hinge on the old eternal theme. The last three are perhaps more finished work than the first four, and this is a pity from the point of view of the reader. *Profiles*, indeed, the longest, is also in some respects the worst-conceived attempt. It is crude and immature in conception and projection. A young officer, in love with Lily Maguire, is deceived by her for a very Emily Brontë-like figure of a bold, bad, handsome man. The girl becomes a disreputable member of the prostitute class, and Maurice, like the young fool he is, wishes to redeem her. But Lily, whom the sensuous, romantic life has taught nothing, could never, she thinks, marry a man she did not care for, although she would sell herself to the first Tom, Dick, or Harry. *A Conflict of Egoisms* concerns two people who have wasted their lives and then utterly destroy themselves by marrying one another, for they

were too selfish to *live* even by themselves. *The Struggle for Life* is a Maupassant[1]-conceived, but ineffectively told story of a wife betrayed by her husband, who sells herself for half-a-crown if she can go home in an hour. *Embers* is much more effectively told, and here at last we begin to realise Crackanthorpe is getting at the back of his characters. The same applies to that able gambling story, *When Greek meets Greek*, while in *A Dead Woman* we have Crackanthorpe at last in his full stride. Rushout the innkeeper, inconsolable for his dead wife, is as real as 'bony and gaunt' Jonathan Hays, who was the dead woman's lover. How the husband discovers the dead woman's infidelity; how he and Hays were to have fought; and how at last 'each remembered that she had belonged to the other, and, at that moment, they felt instinctively drawn together,' is told by a master's hand with a slow deliberation that is as relentless as life itself. Here the narrative is direct and the delineation of character sharp. These two men with the card-sharper Simon live, while as for the women of the book we wish to forget them, for they have nothing to redeem them except possibly the little French girl from Nice.

[1] Maupassant's *Inconsolables*.

Two years later appeared a far more ambitious and maturer volume containing half-a-dozen sentimental studies and half-a-dozen tales of the French villages Crackanthorpe so loved and understood. His method of work becomes more pronounced here, that is to treat an English theme in the French manner, a task which demands more culture than the ruck of the conteurs for the English magazines attain with their facile tears and jackass laughters, their machine-like nonentities and pudibond ineptitudes. Crackanthorpe, indeed, has left no following behind him, and only once later can I recall a volume of short stories that suggests his manner: J. Y. F. Cooke's tales of the nineties in his *Stories of Strange Women.*

In this new volume as before, Crackanthorpe devotes himself to the expansion of the sentimental study, the problems of sexual relationships, which are not altogether pleasing to every one, and this may account for his limited appeal. In *Wreckage* all the women were vile, but here he evidently intends to picture the other side of women in Ella, the wife of the poet Hillier, with its slow Flaubert unrolling of her infinite delusion. In *Battledore and Shuttlecock*, in Nita, of the old Empire

promenade days, he again develops the good side. While in the study of the *Love-sick Curate* we feel that Ethel is not hard-hearted, but only that the Rev. Burkett is an unutterable idiot. *Modern Melodrama* is the short, sharp climacteric stab of Maupassant perhaps not over well done. The sentimental studies close with *Yew-Trees and Peacocks*, which seems rather to have lost its point in the telling. The tales of the Pyrennese villages where Crackanthorpe used to stay are typical productions of the delight of the men of the nineties in their sojourning on the sacred soil of France. *The White Maize*, *Etienne Matton*, and *Gaston Lalanne's Child* are perhaps not unworthy of the master himself in their simple directness, devoid of all unnecessary padding. With a few phrases, indeed, Crackanthorpe can lay his scene, strip his characters nude before us. How we realise, for instance, Ella lying in bed the night before her mistaken marriage with Hillier. She is there in all the virgin simplicity of the average English country girl:

> The window was wide open, and the muslin curtains swaying in the breeze bulged towards her weirdly. She could see the orchard trees bathed in blackness, and above a square of sky,

blue-grey, quivering with stifled light, flecked with a disorder of stars that seemed ready to rain upon the earth. After a while, little by little, she distinguished the forms of the trees. Slowly, monstrous, and sleek, the yellow moon was rising.

She was no longer thinking of herself! She had forgotten that to-morrow was her wedding-day: for a moment, quite impersonally, she watched the moonlight stealing through the trees.

Again, Ronald, the youth from the Army Crammer's, finds his way into the music-hall, where he encounters Nita:

Immediately he entered the theatre, the sudden sight of the scene stopped him, revealed, as it were, through a great gap. The stage blazed white; masses of recumbent girls, bathed in soft tints, swayed to dreamy cadence of muffled violins before the quivering gold-flecked minarets of an Eastern palace. He leaned against the side of the lounge to gaze down across the black belt of heads. The sight bewildered him. By-and-bye, he became conscious of a hum of voices, and a continual movement behind him. Men, for the most part in evening dress, were passing in procession to and fro, some women amongst them, smiling as they twittered mirthlessly; now and then he caught glimpses of others seated before little round tables, vacant, impassive, like waxwork figures, he thought. . . . He was throbbing with trepidating curiosity, buffeted by irresolution.

With the same exactitude the lonely fells around Scarsdale, where Burkett is parson of the small Cumberland village, arise before us.

His posthumous volume, *Last Studies*, contains only three rather long short stories, an 'in memoriam' poem by Stopford A. Brooke, and an appreciation very gracefully done by Henry James. Referring in the field of fiction to the crudity of the old hands and the antiquity of new, his appreciator finds it difficult to render the aspect which constitutes Crackanthorpe's 'troubled individual note.' He comes to the conclusion, 'What appealed to him was the situation that asked for a certain fineness of art, and that could best be presented in a kind of foreshortened picture.'

The short story is mainly of two sorts: 'The chain of items, figures in a kind of sum —one of the simple rules—of movement, added up as on a school-boy's slate, and with the correct total and its little flourish, constituting the finish and accounting for the effect; or else it may be an effort preferably pictorial, a portrait of conditions, an attempt to summarise, and compress for purposes of presentation to "render" even, if possible, for purposes of expression.' From the French Crackanthorpe learnt the latter method, and

practised it. When we come to look at these last three stories (which with the tiny collection of *Vignettes* completes his work) we see how admirably exact is this criticism of his senior.

In *Antony Garstin's Courtship* he is back in his own countryside of Cumberland among the shrewd, hard Dale folk. It is a little masterpiece conceived almost in the hopeless bitterness of Hardy at his darkest, most pessimistic moment. The crudeness in workmanship has gone, only the relentless inevitability of it all remains like the tragedies of life itself. Rosa Blencarn, the parson's niece, a mere cheap flirt of unfinished comeliness, is but the bone of contention between the personalities of Antony and his mother. The widow Garstin is as fine a character as Crackanthorpe, in his twenty-two stories, has created. She lives, and in her veins flows the passion of disappointed age. 'She was a heavy-built woman, upright, stalwart almost, despite her years. Her face was gaunt and sallow; deep wrinkles accentuated the hardness of her features. She wore a widow's black cap above her iron-grey hair, gold-rimmed spectacles, and a soiled chequered apron.' How easily we can see her saying to her great hulking son:

'T' hoose be mine, t' Lord be praised,' she continued in a loud, hard voice, 'an' as long as he spare me, Tony, I'll na' see Rosa Blencarn set foot inside it.'

It has all the unsavoury cruelty of humanity, and to find other such scenes in English literature we have to come down to Caradoc Evans's *My People*, or James Joyce.

In *Trevor Perkins*, in a brief masterly way, we have the soul of the average young man of the nineties, who has ceased to believe in God or tolerate his parents, sketched for us. He walks out with the waitress of his bunshop, and we realise at once he is of those who are doomed to make fools of themselves on the reef of her sex. The last story, *The Turn of the Wheel*, is the history of the daughter who believes in her self-made father, and despises her sidetracked mother as an inferior being, only to find she has made a great mistake. It is one of the longest stories he wrote, and moves easily in the higher strata of London society. From this fashionable world to the rude and rugged scars and fells of Cumberland is a far cry ; but here, as elsewhere, Crackanthorpe finds the friction of humanity is its own worst enemy. Yet behind all this impenetrably impersonal bitter

play of human passions in these short stories, one feels somehow or other the distant beats of the author's compassionate heart, which his sickness of life made him forcibly stop in the pride of his youth before he had time to realise himself or fulfil his rich promise.

IV

The poetry of the period is essentially an expression of moods and sentiments. It is as much a form of impressionism as the art of Monet and Renoir. Further, it seeks after, like all the art of the nineties, that abnormality of proportion of which Bacon wrote in his 'Essay on Beauty.' It is, too, a period wonderfully fertile in song. Besides the nineties' group, which is represented chiefly by the Rhymers' Club, there were many other schools of song. Lord Alfred Douglas in his *City of the Soul*, Oscar Wilde in his *Sphinx* and *The Harlot's House*, Stephen Phillips and Henley, Francis Thompson in his *Hound of Heaven*, are but some of the richness I am compelled to pass over in order to adhere strictly to the programme of this rough summary. Let us, therefore, turn at once to the Rhymers' Club, whose origin and desires have been so well explained by Arthur Symons, the cicerone to the age, in his essay on Ernest Dowson. At the Cheshire Cheese in Fleet Street it was

arranged that a band of young poets should meet, striving to recapture in London something of the Gallic spirit of art and the charm of open discussion in the Latin Quartier. The Club consisted of the following members: John Davidson, Ernest Dowson, Edwin J. Ellis, George Arthur Greene, Lionel Johnson, Arthur Cecil Hillier, Richard Le Gallienne, Victor Plarr, Ernest Radford, Ernest Rhys, Thomas William Rolleston, Arthur Symons, John Todhunter, and William Butler Yeats. Besides these members, the Club, which was without rules or officers, had at one time affiliated to itself the following permanent guests: John Gray, Edward Rose, J. T. Nettleship, Morley Roberts, A. B. Chamberlain, Edward Garnett, and William Theodore Peters.

Oscar Wilde, though never a member, had a great influence on many of those who were, and Victor Plarr describes a memorable meeting of the Rhymers in Mr. Herbert Horne's rooms in the Fitzroy settlement at which Wilde appeared. The poet goes on: 'It was an evening of notabilities. Mr. Walter Crane stood with his back to the mantelpiece, deciding, very kindly, on the merits of our effusions. And round Oscar Wilde, not then under a cloud, hovered reverently Lionel Johnson and Ernest

Dowson, with others. This must have been in 1891, and I marvelled at the time to notice the fascination which poor Wilde exercised over the otherwise rational. He sat as it were enthroned and surrounded by a differential circle.'

The influence of Verlaine and the symbolist poets of Paris in this circle was profound. Every one had a passion for things French. Symons translated the prose poems of Baudelaire and the verses of Mallarmé, Dowson is inspired by the 'Fêtes Gallantes,' and so on. As Mr. Plarr writes: 'Stray Gauls used to be imported to grace literary circles here. I remember one such—a rare instance of a rough Frenchman—to whom Dowson was devoted. When a Gaul appeared in a coterie we were either silent, like the schoolgirls in their French conversation hour, or we talked a weird un-French French like the ladies in some of Du Maurier's drawings.'[1]

Of course it must not be supposed, however, that the nineties ever remained at all stationary in this condition or entirely under these influences. Mr. Plarr is speaking of the early nineties, the age when John Gray's *Silverpoints* was perhaps a fair sample of the poetry of the

[1] Victor Plarr, *Ernest Dowson*, p. 23. 1914.

moment for this group; but, when at the same time it must be remembered, poets like Francis Thompson and William Watson were carrying on the staider traditions of English poetry altogether unmoved by these exotic influences from Montmartre and the studios of the south. The nineties group itself only remained for a restive moment like this before each man was to go his own way. They were indeed all souls seeking the way to perfection in art. Yeats went off to assist to found the Irish School; Richard Le Gallienne went to America; Gray became a priest. Many disappeared shortly afterwards from the lower slopes of Parnassus, not being of those dowered with the true call; and so, one after the other, all are to be accounted for. The genuine men of the nineties after the fall of Wilde seem to have migrated to Smithers' wonderful bookshop in Bond Street, where their later works were issued in ornate editions.

The names of others besides the actual members of the Rhymers' Club must not be altogether forgotten, such as Percy Hemingway with his *Happy Wanderer*, Theodore Wratislaw, Olive Custance, Dollie Radford, Rosamund Marriott-Watson, Norman Gale, and many others who were also of the movement. How-

ever, of them I cannot speak here, but can only refer the reader to the book-lists of Elkin Mathews and John Lane for the first period, and of Leonard Smithers for the second. In the numerous slim plaquettes of verse issued from these presses he will find golden verse worthy of the labour of his research. Indeed, amid so many writers one is compelled to resort to the odious necessity of a choice, so I shall here all too briefly deal with *Silverpoints* as a typical volume of the early period, and then trace succinctly the career of two poets, who had certainly the right to that appellation, Ernest Dowson and John Davidson, and who were both not only of, but actually were the movement itself. Lastly, in this section, as an indication of the wide influence these writers had overseas, as in the case of the Birch Bark School of Canada and certain poets in Australia, I wish to mention the young American poet who was an intimate of so many of the men of the nineties—William Theodore Peters.

The narrow green octavo of *Silverpoints*, with its lambent golden flames, strikes the eye at once as some bizarre and exotic work. It was one of the first of the limited éditions de luxe that mark the new printing of the decade, and is one of the most dainty little books ever issued by Elkin Mathews and John Lane.

Most of the titles are in French, and there are imitations from Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine —the gods of the symbolist school at that moment. Poems are dedicated (it was the habit of the decade) to friends, including Pierre Louÿs, Paul Verlaine, Oscar Wilde, R. H. Sherard, Henri Teixeira de Mattos, Ernest Dowson, etc. The predominant note is that of tigress's blood and tiger-lilies. Honey, roses, white breasts, and golden hair, with fierce passion and indolent languor, are the chords of the book's frisson. All the panoply of the new English art begotten from the French here burgeons forth with the Satanic note that was then in the fashion. We find this in the *Femmes Damnées :*

Like moody beasts they lie along the sands;
Look where the sky against the sea-rim clings:
Foot stretches out to foot, and groping hands
Have languors soft and bitter shudderings.

Some by the light of crumbling, resinous gums,
In the still hollows of old pagan dens,
Call thee in aid to their deliriums
O Bacchus! cajoler of ancient pains.

And those whose breasts for scapulars are fain
Nurse under their long robes the cruel thong,
These, in dim woods, where huddling shadows throng,
Mix with the foam of pleasure tears of pain.

There is more than an echo of Rimbaud's verses in this volume, and the poet is evidently straining always after the violent effect, the climacteric moment of a mood or passion. Probably two of the most successfully carried through crises are *The Barber* and *Mishka*. The first of these as a typical example of the whole school I venture to spheterize in full:

I dreamed I was a barber; and there went
Beneath my hand, oh! manes extravagant.
Beneath my trembling fingers, many a mask
Of many a pleasant girl. It was my task
To gild their hair, carefully, strand by strand;
To paint their eyebrows with a timid hand;
To draw a bodkin, from a vase of Kohl,
Through the closed lashes; pencils from a bowl
Of sepia, to paint them underneath;
To blow upon their eyes with a soft breath.
They lay them back and watched the leaping bands.

The dream grew vague, I moulded with my hands
The mobile breasts, the valley; and the waist
I touched; and pigments reverently placed
Upon their thighs in sapient spots and stains,
Beryls and chrysolites and diaphanes,
And gems whose hot harsh names are never said
I was a masseur; and my fingers bled
With wonder as I touched their awful limbs.

Suddenly, in the marble trough there seems
O, last of my pale mistresses, sweetness!

A twylipped scarlet pansie. My caress
Tinges thy steel-grey eyes to violet,
Adown thy body skips the pit-a-pat
Of treatment once heard in a hospital
For plagues that fascinate, but half appal.

So, at the sound, the blood of me stood cold;
Thy chaste hair ripened into sullen gold;
Thy throat, the shoulders, swelled and were uncouth;
The breasts rose up and offered each a mouth;
And on the belly, pallid blushes crept,
That maddened me, until I laughed and wept.

Here we have a long amorous catalogue. It is the catalogue age which comes via Oscar Wilde's *Sphinx* and *Salomé* from certain French writers. But this does not make up for the singing power of the poet, and in long poems it becomes singularly laborious. However, this phase of poetry is so typical of the age that it is as well to have dealt with it before turning to the essentially 'singing' poets of the period, Dowson and Davidson.

Indeed, there is no one in the nineties worthier of the honourable title of poet than Ernest Dowson. With his unsatisfied passion for Adelaide in Soho; his cry for 'madder music and for stronger wine'; his æsthetic theories, such as that the letter 'v' was the most

beautiful of the letters; his reverence for things French, he has caused Mr. Symons, in one of his most notable essays, to draw a delightful portrait of a true *enfant de Bohême.* Robert Harborough Sherard has also kept the Dowson tradition up in his description of the death of the vexed and torn spirit of the poet in his *Twenty Years in Paris*, a work which contains much interesting material for a study of the nineties. But Victor Plarr, another poet of the nineties, enraged at the incompleteness of these pictures, has tried to give us in his reminiscences, unpublished letters, and marginalia, the other facet of Dowson—the *poète intime* known to few.

It is no question of ours, in a brief summary like this, which is the truer portrait of Dowson; whether he was or was not like Keats in his personal appearance; whether Arthur Moore and Dowson wrote alternate chapters of *A Comedy of Masks;* whether in his last days or not Leonard Smithers used to pay him thirty shillings a week for all he could do; whether he used to pray or not in front of the bearded Virgin at Arques; whether he used to drink hashish or not. All these problems are outside the beauty of the lyric poetry of Dowson; and it is by his poetry and not

because of all these rumours around his brief life that he will live.

He was the poet impressionist of momentary emotions, and poetry with him was, as Stéphane Mallarmé said, 'the language of a crisis.' Each Dowson poem is more or less the feverish impression of a hectical crisis. For in a way he takes off where Keats ended, for Keats was becoming a hectic, while Dowson started out as one.

> Exceeding sorrow
> Consumeth my sad heart!
> Because to-morrow
> We must part.
> Now is exceeding sorrow
> All my part! . . .
>
> Be no word spoken;
> Weep nothing: let a pale
> Silence, unbroken
> Silence prevail!
> Prithee, be no word spoken,
> Lest I fail!

His earliest poem to attract attention was *Amor Umbratilis*, which appeared in Horne's *Century Guild Hobby Horse*. It has the real Dowson note, and marks him down at once as one of those poets who are by nature *buveurs de lune*. That was in 1891. In 1892 came out the first book of the Rhymers' Club, and

with six poems of Dowson in it he definitely took his place in the movement. It is said that the Oscar Wilde set sent him a telegram shortly after this 'peremptorily ordering him to appear at the Café Royal to lunch with the then great man.' Dowson was flattered, and might well be, for Wilde was a splendid judge of good work.

Two years later the Club's second book appeared, and Dowson has again half a dozen poems in it, including the lovely *Extreme Unction*, and that rather doubtfully praised lyric '*non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae*.' Then in the same year as *The Savoy* (1896) appeared his verses, printed on Japanese vellum and bound in parchment, with a cover design in gold by Aubrey Beardsley—a typical Smithers book. This volume contains the best of Dowson, the handsel (if it is not too big a phrase to use of such a delicate and delightful artist), the handsel of his immortality. For there is something about Dowson's best work, though so fragile in its texture, that has the classic permanence of a latter-day Propertius. He has a Latin brevity and clarity, and he is at his best in this volume. Something has vanished from the enchantment of the singer in *Decorations* (1899). It is like the

flowers of the night before. One feels that so many of these later verses had been done perforce, as Victor Plarr says, rather to keep on in the movement lest one was forgotten. But in 1899 the movement was moribund, and the winter of discontent for the Pierrots of the nineties was fast closing down. Remembering these things, one murmurs the sad beauty of those perfect lines of this true poet in his first volume:

> When this, our rose, is faded,
> And these, our days, are done,
> In lands profoundly shaded
> From tempest and from sun:
> Ah, once more come together,
> Shall we forgive the past,
> And safe from worldly weather
> Possess our souls at last.

Not without reason one feels he has been called the 'rosa rosarum of All the Nineties,' in so far as poetry is concerned; but, personally, I would prefer to call him, if one has to call such a true poet anything, the poets' poet of the nineties. The best of his short stories rank high in the great mass of the literature of those days, and are dealt with (together with his partnership in two novels) in another section. As for his little one-act play,

The Pierrot of the Minute, one is apt to feel perhaps that Beardsley was not over unjust to it, when he described it as a tiresome playlet he had to illustrate. At any rate, it was the cause of Beardsley's doing one or two admirable decorations, even if the actual play, in which the young American poet of the nineties, Theodore Peters (of whom more anon), and Beardsley's own sister acted, was not effective as a stage production.

There is no doubt but that Davidson, though he was outside the coteries of the nineties, was still of them. First of all he was a Scotchman of evangelical extraction, and secondly he was not an Oxford man. All this made him outside the group. On the other count, he was of the Rhymers' Club, though he did not contribute to the books. He was strongly influenced by Nietzsche, though the French influence in him was rather negative. His books came from the Bodley Head and were well recognised by its other members. Beardsley even decorated some of them, and Rothenstein did his portrait for *The Yellow Book*. In fact, Davidson himself wrote for that periodical. All this made him of the group. It would be thus impossible to pass over such a poet in connection with this movement, for Davidson has

written some magnificent lyrics, if he has made his testaments too often and too turgidly. The Davidson, indeed, of the nineties will be discovered to be, by any one examining his works, the Davidson that will most probably survive.

He was born in 1857, but as Mr. Holbrook Jackson admirably puts it, 'John Davidson did not show any distinctive *fin de siècle* characteristics until he produced his novel *Perfervid*[1] in 1890.' His next work, a volume of poetry, which was the first to attract attention, *In a Music Hall and other Poems* (1891), accentuates these distinctive characteristics, and fairly launches him on the tide of the movement. Before that time he had been school-mastering and clerking in Scotland, while his leisure had begotten three rather ill-conceived works. Davidson discovered himself when he came to London to write. The movement of the nineties stimulated him towards artistic production, and when that movement was killed by the fall of Wilde, and buried by the Boer War, Davidson again lost himself in the philosophic propaganda of his last years before he was driven to suicide. Philosophy, indeed, with John Davidson, was

[1] *The Eighteen Nineties*, by Holbrook Jackson, p. 215. 1913.

to eat one's heart with resultant mental indigestion that completely unbalanced the artist in him. Therefore, so far as this appreciation is concerned, we only have to deal with the happy Davidson of the *Ballads* and *Fleet Street Eclogues* fame ; the gay writer of *A Random Itinerary* (1894) ; the rather hopeless novelist of *Baptist Lake* (1894), and *The Wonderful Mission of Earl Lavender* (1895). The last tedious phase before he gave himself to the Cornish sea is no affair of ours. In his *Testament* he says 'none should outlive his power,' and realising probably that he had made this mistake, he wished to end it all.

But in the nineties he was like his own birds, full of 'oboe' song and 'broken music.' Seldom has the English river, the Thames, been more sweetly chaunted than by him. While if we are looking for his kinship with his time there is no doubt about it in *The Ballad of a Nun*, who remarks :

> I care not for my broken vow,
> Though God should come in thunder soon,
> I am sister to the mountains now,
> And sister to the sun and moon.

A statement which we feel many of the Beardsley ladies cadaverous with sin or fat with luxury would have been quite capable of repeating. Again, his *Thirty Bob a Week* in

The Yellow Book is as much a ninety effort as his *Ballad of Hell*, while his novel, *Earl Lavender*, is a burlesque of certain of the eccentricities of the period. In a poetical note to this volume he sings:

> Oh! our age end style perplexes
> All our Elders' time has famed;
> On our sleeves we wear our sexes,
> Our diseases, unashamed.

The prevalent realistic disease in poetry is well represented by *A Woman and her Son:*

> He set his teeth, and saw his mother die,
> Outside a city reveller's tipsy tread
> Severed the silence with a jagged rent.

Above all, Davidson handles with marked facility the modern ballad medium of narrative verse. *The Ballad of a Nun*, *The Ballad of an Artist's Wife*, and others, relate their story in easy, jogging quatrains. As a sample one can quote from *A New Ballad of Tannhäuser:*

> As he lay worshipping his bride,
> While rose leaves in her bosom fell,
> On dreams came sailing on a tide
> Of sleep, he heard a matin bell.
>
> 'Hark! let us leave the magic hill,'
> He said, 'and live on earth with men.'
> 'No, here,' she said, 'we stay until
> The Golden Age shall come again.'

But if Davidson could tell a tale in verse it cannot be said he understood the novel form. Although here it is rather noticeable that he has a strange, unique feature among his contemporaries. For he at least has a sense of humour. Max Beerbohm, it is true, had the gift of irony; but Davidson, almost alone, has a certain vein of grim Scotch humour, as, for example, in the character of little red-headed Mortimer in *Perfervid.* In Dowson, Johnson, Symons, and the others, one is sometimes appalled by the seriousness of it all. Lastly, but by no means least, Davidson occasionally attains the lyric rapture of unadulterated poetry in his shorter pieces, while his vignettes of nature linger in the memory on account of their truth and beauty. Both these qualities—the lyric rapture and the keen eye for country sights and sounds—are to be found, for instance, in *A Runnable Stag:*

When the pods went pop on the broom, green broom,
And apples began to be golden-skinned,
We harboured a stag in the Priory coomb,
And we feathered his trail up wind, up wind!

Among many other ambitions, Davidson wanted to fire the scientific world with

imaginative poetry. As he phrased it: 'Science is still a valley of dead bones till imagination breathes upon it.' There are indeed evidences of an almost Shelleyan pantheism in his credo. Unhappy was his life, but, probably, he did not labour in vain, for a handsel of his song will endure. Writing, indeed, was the consolation of his life:

> I cannot write, I cannot think;
> 'Tis half delight and half distress;
> My memory stumbles on the brink
> Of some unfathomed happiness—
>
> Of some old happiness divine,
> What haunting scent, what haunting note,
> What word, or what melodious line,
> Sends my heart throbbing to my throat?

Indeed, why repeat it, both Dowson and he will live by their poetry. But in the case of Davidson, in addition, there is his rather elephantine humour. While again it must always be remembered that he had the courage to state that the fear of speaking freely had 'cramped the literature of England for a century.' It was the liberty of the French literature indeed that in no small degree captivated the minds of all these young men. Very few of them, however, had the courage to

speak freely. But it must always remain to Davidson's credit that he tried to write a freer, emancipated novel, which, however, he failed to do, because he had a very remote idea of novel construction.

It was in 1896 that the quaint little salmon-pink volume of William Theodore Peters, the young American poet, appeared, entitled *Posies out of Rings*. This young American was an intimate of some of the men of the nineties, and though it is doubtful whether he himself would have ever achieved high fame as a poet, he had a sincere love for the beautiful things of Art. Among all these tragedies of ill-health, insanity and suicide that seemed to track down each of these young men, his fate was perhaps the saddest of all, for he died of starvation in Paris,[1] where many of his verses had appeared in a distinctly American venture, *The Quartier Latin*. His volume of conceits are a harking back, not always satisfactorily, to the ancient form of the versified epigram. What was wrong with his Muse is that it was only half alive. He puts indeed his own case in a nutshell in that charming little poem *Pierrot and the Statue*, which I venture to quote in full:

[1] R. H. Sherard, *Twenty Years in Paris*.

One summer evening in a charméd wood,
Before a marble Venus, Pierrot stood;
A Venus beautiful beyond compare,
Gracious her lip, her snowy bosom bare,
Pierrot amorous, his cheeks aflame,
Called the white statue many a lover's name.
An oriole flew down from off a tree,
'Woo not a goddess made of stone!' sang he.
'All of my warmth to warm it,' Pierrot said,
When by the pedestal he sank down dead;
The statue faintly flushed, it seemed to strive
To move—*but it was only half alive.*

Such was the Muse's response to Peters' wooing; while he, in that strange bohemian world of so many of the young writers of that day, wrote in another short poem the epitaph of the majority of those who gave so recklessly of their youth, only to fail. It is called *To the Café aux Phares de l'Ouest, Quartier Montparnasse:*

The painted ship in the paste-board sea
Sails night and day.
To-morrow it will be as far as it was yesterday.
But underneath, in the Café,
The lusty crafts go down,
And one by one, poor mad souls drown—
While the painted ship in the paste-board sea
Sails night and day.

Such, indeed, was too often the fate of the epigoni of the movement. Their nightingales

were never heard; they were buried with all their songs still unsung.

The only other volume which Theodore Peters essayed, to my knowledge, was a little poetic one-acter like his friend Ernest Dowson's *Pierrot of the Minute* (for which work he wrote an epilogue). Peters' play, entitled *The Tournament of Love*, is a very scarce item of the nineties' bibliography. He calls it a pastoral masque in one act, and it was published by Brentano's at Paris in 1894 and illustrated with drawings by Alfred Jones. As Bantock wrote the music for *The Pierrot of the Minute*, Noel Johnson composed the melodies for *The Tournament of Love*. The masque was put on at the Théâtre d'Application (La Bodinière), 18 rue St. Lazare, May 8, 1894. Peters himself took the part of Bertrand de Roaix, a troubadour, while among the cast were Wynford Dewhurst, the painter, and Loïe Fuller, the dancer. The scene is an almond orchard on the outskirts of Toulouse, on the afternoon of the 3rd May, 1498. 'A group of troubadours discovered at the right of the stage, seated upon a white semicircular Renaissance bench, some tuning their instruments. Other poets towards the back. A laurel tree at the right centre. On the left centre two heralds guard the entrance to the

lists.' Pons d'Orange, the arrived poet, will win at this tournament of love, the Eglantine nouvelle, 'that golden prize of wit.' But it is won by Bertrand de Roaix, who wants it not, but the love of the institutress of this court of love, 'Clémence Isaure, the Primrose Queen of Beauty.' At his love protestations she laughs; the troubadour goes outside the lists and stabs himself. As he lies dying Clémence, clothed in her white samite, powdered with silver fleur-de-lys and edged with ermine, her dust-blonde hair bound with a fillet of oak-leaves, comes forth from the lists and finds her boy lover's body:

> Love came and went; *we*
> Knew him not. I have found my soul too late.

V

The Victorian literary era was fecund in essayists, and the last decade lived up to this reputation. The forerunners of the essayists of the nineties were obviously Walter Pater, John Addington Symonds, Oscar Wilde with his *Intentions* and Whistler in his *Gentle Art*. Behind these there was a great mass of French influence which, together with literary impressionism as exemplified in such books as Crackanthorpe's *Vignettes*, was to give the essay and the so-called study a new lease of life. Indeed, what came out of the period was not merely criticism as a useful broom sweeping away the chaff from the wheat, but criticism itself as a creative art, as Wilde chose to call it; not merely dry-as-dust records of plays and cities, and other affairs as in guide manuals, but artistic impressions, in some ways as vital as the objects themselves. Mr. Arthur Symons, in particular, has given us an abundance of this kind of work of which I have already spoken. So did Lionel

Johnson and Mr. Max Beerbohm, to whom I propose to allude here, and many others like Mr. Bernard Shaw, who, though not of the movement, moved alongside it on his own way, and Mr. G. S. Street, in his *Episodes*, Richard Le Gallienne, Arthur Galton, Francis Adams in his *Essays in Modernity*, etc. etc. One has only to turn over the magazines of the period to find a band of writers, too numerous to mention, who aided on the movement with their pens. To cite one prominent example alone, there was Grant Allen with his essay on *The New Hedonism*. Here, however, I must be content with a brief appreciative glance at the works of the two writers I have mentioned, who were both actually of and in the movement itself. I have not here of set purpose referred to the Henley essayists like Charles Whibley. But the two men of the nineties I have chosen to speak of here have been selected in the way an essayist should be selected nine times out of ten, that is to say, because of his pleasing personality. These two writers—particularly Max—are such individual writers, yet they never offend. They are just pleasant garrulous companions.

For those who care at all passionately for the precious things of literature, the work of

Lionel Johnson will always remain a cherished and secluded nook. The man was a scholar, a poet, and a critic, whose dominant note was gracile lucidity. A friend writing of his personal appearance at the time of his death said, 'Thin, pale, very delicate he looked, with a twitching of the facial muscles, which showed even at the age of twenty-four how unfit was his physique to support the strain of an abnormally nervous organization. Quick and mouselike in his movements, reticent of speech and low-voiced, he looked like some old-fashioned child who had strayed by chance into an assembly of men. But a child could not have shown that inward smile of appreciative humour, a little aloof, a little contemptuous perhaps, that worked constantly around his mouth. He never changed except in the direction of a greater pallor and a greater fragility.'

Cloistral mysticism was the key-chord of his two volumes of poetry (1895 and 1897). In some respects he seems to have strayed out of the seventeenth century of Crashaw and Herbert. His early training, no doubt, engendered this aspect. After six years in the grey Gothic school of Winchester he passed on to New College, Oxford. Here he came under

the influence of Pater, and was charmed by the latter's then somewhat hieratic austerity. A devout Irish Catholic, he was moved by three themes: his old school, Oxford, and Ireland, and to these he unfortunately too often devoted his muse. After the quiet seclusion of his Oxford years, on entering the vortex of London literary life he found that the world of wayfaring was a somewhat rough passage in the mire for one so delicate. Out of the struggle between his scholarly aspirations and the cry of his time for life, more life, was woven perhaps the finest of all his poems, *The Dark Angel:*

> Dark angel, with thine aching lust
> To rid the world of penitence:
> Malicious angel, who still dost
> My soul such subtile violence!—
>
> Because of thee, the land of dreams
> Becomes a gathering place of fears:
> Until tormented slumber seems
> One vehemence of useless tears . . .
>
> Thou art the whisper in the gloom,
> The hinting tone, the haunting laugh:
> Thou art the adorner of my tomb,
> The minstrel of mine epitaph.

Most of his poems are subjective, and the majority have a certain stiffness of movement of a priest laden with chasuble; but some-

times, however, as in *Mystic and Cavalier*, or in the lines on the statue of Charles I at Charing Cross, he writes with a winsome charm and freedom of spirit:

> Armoured he rides, his head
> Bare to the stars of doom:
> He triumphs now, the dead
> Beholding London's gloom . . .

Surely this poem has the proud note of Henley! There is another trait in his verse, which, in view of his essays, it is as well not to pass over. Like William Watson, his literary poems are pregnant with phrases of rich criticism. He calls back the immortals in a true bookman's invocation hailing 'opulent Pindar,' 'the pure and perfect voice of Gray,' 'pleasant and elegant and garrulous Pliny':

> Herodotus, all simple and all wise;
> Demosthenes, a lightning flame of scorn:
> The surge of Cicero, that never dies;
> And Homer, grand against the ancient morn.

But we are here chiefly concerned with his prose writings. If it is the duty of the essayist to mirror the intellectuality of his age, Lionel Johnson was a mirror for the Oxford standpoint of the nineties. There

still remain many of his papers uncollected in various old newspaper files. But certainly the best of his work has been lovingly collected by friendly hands, and worthily housed in *Post Liminium*. Take, for instance, this passage from an essay on books published originally in *The Academy* (December 8th, 1900):

The glowing of my companionable fire upon the backs of my companionable books, and then the familiar difficulty of choice. Compassed about by old friends, whose virtues and vices I know better than my own, I will be loyal to loves that are not of yesterday. New poems, new essays, new stories, new lives, are not my company at Christmastide, but the never-ageing old. 'My days among the dead are passed.' Veracious Southey, how cruel a lie! My sole days among the dead are the days passed among the still-born or moribund moderns, not the white days and shining nights free for the strong voices of the ancients in fame. A classic has a permanence of pleasurability; that is the meaning of his estate and title.

Or again, Johnson in his paper on *The Work of Mr. Pater*, sets forth perhaps the best appreciation of his master that has yet appeared:

'Magica sympathiæ!' words borne upon the shield of Lord Herbert of Cherbury, are inscribed

upon the writings of Mr. Pater, who found his way straight from the first to those matters proper to his genius, nor did he, as Fuseli says of Leonardo, 'waste life, insatiate in experiment.' . . . 'Nemo perfectus est,' says St. Bernard, 'qui perfectior esse appetit': it is as true in art as in religion. In art also 'the way to perfection is through a series of disgusts' . . . and truly, as Joubert said, we should hesitate before we differ in religion from the saints, in poetry from the poets. . . . There is no languorous toying with things of beauty, in a kind of opiate dream, to be found here.

While Symons has written on all the arts, the sphere of Johnson has been more limited to traditional English lines. Johnson attempts no broad æsthetical system like the former. All that he does is to illuminate the writer of whom he is speaking. And his little essays, eminent in their un-English lucidity, their scrupulous nicety, their conscious and deliberate beauty, adding to our *belles lettres* a classical execution and finish (which perfection accounts perhaps for the classical smallness of his bookmaking) have all the bewildering charm of a born stylist. Certain of his phrases linger in the mind like music. 'Many a sad half-murmured thought of Pascal, many a deep and plangent utterance of Lucretius.' Or the line: 'The face whose changes domi-

nate my heart.' Like the styles of Newman and Pater, on which his own is founded, he is singularly allusive. He cites critics by chapter and verse like an advocate defending a case. In fact, as in his critical *magnum opus*, *The Art of Thomas Hardy*, he is amazingly judicial. It is, too, since he is essentially academic, to the older critics he prefers to turn for guidance. As he writes: 'Flaubert and Baudelaire and Gautier, Hennequin and M. Zola and M. Mallarmé, with all their colleagues or exponents, may sometimes be set aside, and suffer us to hear Quintilian or Ben Jonson, Cicero or Dryden.' This habit sometimes makes him strenuous reading, particularly in longer criticisms like *The Art of Thomas Hardy*.

We grow weary of all this quotative authority. Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* cannot be brought into every-day literary criticism. We want to hear more of Lionel Johnson's own direct opinions and less of these selected passages from his library. So it is to those passages where Johnson is most himself we turn in *The Art of Thomas Hardy*, which, in spite of its academicism and the youthfulness of its author, remains a genuine piece of sound critical work. The delightful imagery of the

prose in such passages is often very illuminating, as in this paragraph:

> From long and frequent converse with works of any favourite author, we often grow to thinking of them under some symbol or image; to see them summed up and expressed in some one composite scene of our own making; this is my 'vision' of Mr. Hardy's works. A rolling down country, crossed by a Roman road; here a gray standing stone, of what sacrificial ritual origin I can but guess; there a grassy barrow, with its great bones, its red-brown jars, its rude gold ornament, still safe in earth; a broad sky burning with stars; a solitary man. It is of no use to turn away, and to think of the village farms and cottages, with their antique ways and looks; of the deep woods, of the fall of the woodman's axe, the stir of the wind in the branches; of the rustic feasts and festivals, when the home-brewed drink goes round, to the loosening of tongues and wits; of the hot meadows, fragrant hayfields, cool dairies, and blazing gardens; of shining cart-horses under the chestnut-trees and cows called in at milking time: they are characteristic scenes, but not the one characteristic scene. That is the great down by night, with its dead in their ancient graves, and its lonely living figure; . . .

There is, perhaps, a reek about it all of a too-conscious imitation of Pater's murmured obituaries which makes one in the end rather tired of this hieratic treatment of art, so that

one turns rather gladly to the one or two tales he wrote. For example in *The Lilies of France*, an episode of French anti-clericalism, which appeared in *The Pageant*, 1897, he slowly builds up a thing of verbal beauty that one feels was actually worthy of him, while in the previous number of the same quarterly he perpetrated a delightful ironism on the literary men of his period entitled *Incurable*, in which, perhaps, we may trace faint autobiographical clues. Such, briefly, was the work of this young man who was found dead in Fleet Street early one morning, aged thirty-five.

But the writer who was to bring irony in English literature to a consummate pitch, and add to the age a strange brief brilliance of his own wilful spirit, was Max Beerbohm. Max, the 'Incomparable' as Bernard Shaw once described him, is the charm of the gilded lily, the fairy prince of an urbane artificiality: he is in literature what the cocktail is among drinks; he is the enemy of dullness and the friend of that Greek quality called 'charis.' He is the public school and Varsity man who is fond of, but afraid of, being tedious in literature; so with delightful affectation his vehicle is persiflage with a load of wit he pretends to disdain. Of all the prose writers of the Beardsley

period he is the easiest and most charming to read. In fact, he is the ideal essayist. He titillates the literary sense. Fortunately his glass is small, for if one had to drink it in quart pots the result would be as disastrous as in his one and only mistake—the long novel *Zuleika Dobson*, which is a late work written long after the nineties had been swallowed up by that maw which swallowed up Lesbia's sparrow and all other beautiful dead things.

Max said in jest, 'I belong to the Beardsley period,' and it is one of those jests which is only too painfully true. When he was at Oxford he was caught up in the movement, and wrote, under Wilde's influence, *A Defence of Cosmetics* for the first number of *The Yellow Book*, and he also appeared in Lord Alfred Douglas's magazine. Thenceforward he contributed to various quarterlies, while in 1896 the little red volume with its white paper label appeared as *The Works*, containing all the best of this precocious *enfant terrible* of literature, who assures us that he read in bed, while at school, *Marius the Epicurean*, and found it not nearly so difficult as *Midshipman Easy*. At the age of twenty-five he cries: 'I shall write no more. Already I feel myself to be a trifle outmoded,' and he religiously does not keep his word. He

keeps pouring out caricatures, writes *More*, the companion volume to *The Works*, and perpetrates his short story *The Happy Hypocrite*. Beyond 1899 we cannot follow him, but he has been busy ever since with his parodies, his *Yet Again*, his lamentable novel, his one-act play, and so on.

It is to that Beardsley period to which he said he belonged we are here restricted. And it must be admitted that though the Boer War and the Great War do not seem to have gagged him, there is something so impishly impudent in his earlier work which renders it more remarkable than the complacent efforts of his later years.

Amid the searching seriousness of the nineties, Max is like balm in Gilead. He has the infinite blessing of irony. The others, except Beardsley (who too has this gift), are so appallingly serious. The French influences that went to their making seem to have killed the valiant English humour of Falstaff, Pickwick, and Verdant Green. They are all like young priests who will take no liberty with their ritual; but Max saves the period with his whimsical irony. His is not the fearful, mordant irony of Octave Mirbeau, but a dainty butterfly fancy playing lightly over the

pleasures of a pleasant life. To be essentially civilised is to be like a god. This is the pose of such a mentality. It is a winsome pose with no sharp edges to it, just as the *poseur* himself must be wilfully blind to all the seaminess of life. In front of his window (if a temperament be a window looking out on life) there is a pleasant garden. Beyond is the noise and dust of the highway. He is the dandy in his choice of life as in his choice of literature, and in more than one sense he has written the happiest essays of the period.

It has been said his caricatures are essays. May we not equally say his essays are caricatures? The essay, indeed, is the work of the feline male, the man who sits beside the fire like Charles Lamb. The out-of-doors man writes the episode. But Max is essentially an indoors man, who has a perfect little dressing-room like a lady's boudoir, but much neater, where he concocts his essays we read so easily by infinite labour, with a jewelled pen. It is as though he had said: 'Literature must either be amusing or dull; mine shall be the former.' He is very much the young man about town who has consented gracefully to come and charm us. What he wrote of Whistler in *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, we may say of him:

'His style never falters. The silhouette of no sentence is ever blurred. Every sentence is ringing with a clear, vocal cadence.' And the refrain is Max himself all the time, and his personality is so likeable we stomach it all the time. It is the note that vibrates through all his amiable satiric irony, whether it be on the House of Commons Manner or in defence of the use of Cosmetics, or in describing the period of 1880. Everything, from first to last, is done with such good taste. Even in his wildest flights of raillery he is utterly purposed not to offend. In his charming paper, *1880*, he has given us a vigorous vignette of the previous decade to *The Yellow Book* age. One can hardly help quoting a small passage here from this admirably worked up prose: 'In fact Beauty had existed long before 1880. It was Mr. Oscar Wilde who managed her début. To study the period is to admit that to him was due no small part of the social vogue that Beauty began to enjoy. Fired by his fervid words, men and women hurled their mahogany into the streets and ransacked the curio-shops for the furniture of Annish days. Dadoes arose upon every wall, sunflowers and the feathers of peacocks curved in every corner, tea grew quite cold while the guests were

praising the Willow Pattern of its cup. A few fashionable women even dressed themselves in sinuous draperies and unheard-of greens. Into whatsoever ball-room you went, you would surely find, among the women in tiaras, and the fops and the distinguished foreigners, half a score of comely ragamuffins in velveteen, murmuring sonnets, posturing, waving their hands. Beauty was sought in the most unlikely places. Young painters found her mobbled in the fogs, and bank-clerks versed in the writings of Mr. Hamerton, were heard to declare, as they sped home from the city, that the Underground Railway was beautiful from London Bridge to Westminster, but not from Sloane Square to Notting Hill Gate.'

It is thus that Max can play with a chord of almost tender irony on his subject, and such a style, so full of the writer's personality, has the cachet of the veritable essayist. How charmingly, for example, he records his reminiscences of Beardsley. It is a delightful little picture of the artist, interesting enough to place beside Arthur Symons's portrait: 'He loved dining out, and, in fact, gaiety of any kind. His restlessness was, I suppose, one of the symptoms of his malady. He was always most content

where there was the greatest noise and bustle, the largest number of people, and the most brilliant light. The "domino-room" at the Café Royal had always a great fascination for him: he liked the mirrors and the florid gilding, the little parties of foreigners, and the smoke and the clatter of the dominoes being shuffled on the marble tables. . . . I remember, also, very clearly, a supper at which Beardsley was present. After the supper we sat up rather late. He was the life and soul of the party, till, quite suddenly almost in the middle of a sentence, he fell fast asleep in his chair. He had overstrained his vitality, and it had all left him. I can see him now as he sat there with his head sunk on his breast; the thin face, white as the gardenia in his coat, and the prominent, harshly-cut features; the hair, that always covered his whole forehead in a fringe and was of so curious a colour—a kind of tortoise-shell; the narrow, angular figure, and the long hands that were so full of power.'[1]

Outside this medium of the essay, with the exception of the caricatures, Max is no longer the incomparable, for his short story, *The Happy Hypocrite*, is not a short story at all,

[1] *The Idler*, May, 1898.

but a spoilt essay;[1] while his novel is not merely a failure, but a veritable disaster. With his first paper in *The Yellow Book* he fell in with the step of the men of the nineties, and he too became a part of their efflorescence. Sufficient unto that time is his work, and with a final quotation from this early paper so redolent of the movement that there is no mistaking it, we must leave him and his future on the knees of the gods: 'Was it not at Capua that they had a whole street where nothing was sold but dyes and unguents? We must have such a street, and, to fill our new Seplosia, our Arcade of Unguents, all herbs and minerals and live creatures shall give of their substance. The white cliffs of Albion shall be ground to powder for Loveliness, and perfumed by the ghost of many a little violet. The fluffy eider-ducks, that are swimming round the pond, shall lose their feathers, that the powder-puff may be moonlike as it passes over Loveliness' lovely face.'

[1] His Children's Tale, *The Small Boy and the Barley Sugar* (*The Parade*, 1897), should also be mentioned as another case of shipwrecked ingenuity.

VI

Here I propose to go through a litany of some of my omissions. In essaying to depict the aspects of an age there is always this pitfall, omission, which ambuscades the adventurous spirit. For we who know so little even about ourselves—how can we, without grave impertinence, boldly say I wish to bring back to the mind of others an age dead and gone? Everything is so interwoven in life that it is, for example, an unwarranted arbitrariness to discuss the literature of this period without brooding on the black and white art of the time, or the canvases of its painters.

I have worried for some space over Aubrey Beardsley, but I have not spoken of men like Mr. S. H. Sime, whose work Beardsley so delighted in. Probably Sidney H. Sime's work in *The Butterfly*, *The Idler*, *Pick-me-Up*, *Eureka*, etc., besides his book illustrations, is in some ways the most powerfully imaginative of the period. There has been a Beardsley craze, and most assuredly there will be one day a

Sime craze, when collectors have focussed properly the marvellous suggestive power of this artist's work. Unfortunately, scattered up and down old magazines, much of this work is, as it were, lost for the moment like Toulouse Lautrec's drawings in papers like *Le Rire*. But when it is garnered up in a worthy book of drawings like the Beardsley books, the power of Sime's work will be undoubted. Fortunately Sime is still amongst us, and occasionally a Dunsany book brings us fresh evidence of his genius.

Again, I have not alluded to Edgar Wilson's bizarre and fascinating decorations of submarine life and Japonesque figures. Like Shannon, Ricketts, Raven Hill, and others, he received his early art education at the Lambeth School of Art. At the end of the eighties he began collecting Japanese prints long before Beardsley had left school. In fact, Edgar Wilson was one of the pioneers of the Japanese print in this country—a love for the strange which came over to England from France. A typical decorative design of Wilson's[1] is 'In the Depths of the Sea,' representing an octopus rampant over a human skull, beneath which are two strange flat fish, and in the background

[1] *Edgar Wilson and his Work*, by Arthur Lawrence, *The Idler*, July, 1899.

a sunken old three-decker with quaintly carved stern and glorious prow. *Pick-me-Up* first used his work as it did that of many another young artist, and in its back files much of his best work can be found. For *The Rambler* he did different designs for each issue, which is probably the only redeeming feature about that early Harmsworth periodical. *The Sketch*, *Cassell's*, *Scribner's*, and above all *The Idler* and *The Butterfly*, are beautified among other papers by his exotic decorations.

Once more I have not spoken at all of Miss Althea Gyles's hectic visions which, in her illustrations for Wilde's *The Harlot's House*, probably reached the acme of the period's realisation of the weird. She is of course really of the Irish symbolists, and not one of the nineties' group at all; but, in her Wilde illustrations, she almost enters the same field as the men of the nineties. Her connection, too, with the firm of Smithers is another strong excuse for mentioning her work here. In *The Dome* both her drawings and poems appeared, while in the December number for 1898 there is a note on her symbolism by W. B. Yeats. In all her drawings the fancy that seems to have such free flight is in reality severely ordered by the designer's symbolism. Sometimes it is merely

intriguing, as in drawings like 'The Rose of God,' where a naked woman is spread-eagled against the clouds above a fleet of ships and walled city, while in other designs the symbolism is full of suggestive loveliness, as in 'Noah's Raven.' 'The Ark floats upon a grey sea under a grey sky, and the raven flutters above the sea. A sea nymph, whose slender swaying body drifting among the grey waters is a perfect symbol of the soul untouched by God or by passion, coils the fingers of one hand about his feet and offers him a ring, while her other hand holds a shining rose under the sea. Grotesque shapes of little fishes flit about the rose, and grotesque shapes of larger fishes swim hither and thither. Sea nymphs swim through the windows of a sunken town, and reach towards the rose hands covered with rings; and a vague twilight hangs over all.' This is explained to represent the search of man for the fleshly beauty which is so full of illusions for us all, while the spiritual beauty is ever far away. To this kind of interpretative design Oscar Wilde's swan song, *The Harlot's House*, lends itself admirably, and Miss Gyles's black and white work here becomes inspired to the standard of Beardsley's and Sime's best work. The shadow effects illustrating the stanzas,

Sometimes a clockwork puppet pressed
A phantom lover to her breast,
Sometimes they seemed to try and sing.

Sometimes a horrible marionette
Came out and smoked its cigarette
Upon the steps like a live thing

must be seen before one can place Althea Gyles's drawings in their proper place. It is not a replica of Beardsley, it is not a faint far-off imitation of a Félicien Rops or Armand Rassenfosse, but something genuinely original in its shadow-graphic use of masses of black on a white ground.

Once more, *mea culpa*, I have paid scant attention to Max Beerbohm's caricatures, and I have failed to call attention here to his earlier and later method of work. I have not even spoken of his little paper entitled *The Spirit of Caricature*, wherein he discusses the spirit of the art he practises. God forgive me! Or yet again what meed of homage have I yet rendered to Mr. Will Rothenstein's lithographic portraits, which are absolutely a necessity to any one who would live a while with the shades of these men. Take, for example, his *Liber Juniorum*, which alone contains lithographed drawings of Aubrey Beardsley, Max Beerbohm, and Arthur Symons. Then there are so many others over whose

achievements I must keep a holy silence, such as Mr. Charles Ricketts and his *Dial*, which was published by the Vale Press, and to which John Gray contributed many poems.

Again, there are the colourists of this group, particularly Walter Sickert and Charles Conder. The latter, above all, is the colour comrade to Beardsley's black and white. His figures are the lovers of Dowson's verse, his landscapes and world have all those memories of the golden time that haunt the brain of John Gray and Theodore Wratislaw. No note, however short, on the nineties would be complete without a halt for praise of this painter of a strangely coloured *dolce far niente*. For everything in his work, be it on canvas, silk panel, or dainty fan, is drowsy with the glory of colour (as Mr. Holbrook Jackson admirably says), 'colour suggesting form, suggesting all corporeal things, suggesting even itself, for Conder never more than hints at the vivid possibilities of life, more than a hint might waken his puppets from their Laodicean dream.'

Whether an idyllic landscape or a fantastic *bal masqué* of Montmartre or an Elysian *fête galante* was his theme, the work itself is always permeated with the spirit of Conder. His nude figure 'Pearl,' his 'L'Oiseau Bleu,' his 'Femme dans une loge au théâtre,' are

typical of his successful achievements. The 'Fickle Love' fan is but one of the numerous exquisite works he produced in this branch of art; while 'The Masquerade' is the work of a Beardsley-like fancy which could colour like Conder.

Like his personality, his work suffered from certain unhappy moods, and that is what makes so much of it uneven. Born in 1868, a descendant of Louis Francis Roubiliac, the famous sculptor, whose work for the figures of our eighteenth century porcelain factories is so well known, of Conder it may be said, as of all artists with French blood in them, when he is successful he is irresistible. He might not be able to draw modern men, but how beautifully he drew the women of his day can be seen in 'La Toilette.' He delighted, indeed, in designing women wandering in dream gardens, in painting roses and Princes Charming.

It would be pleasant to travel through this world of delightful dreams, were we not restricted of set purpose to the literary side of the movement. And has it not already been done in Mr. Frank Gibson's *Charles Conder*?

Again, some of the publishers who produced the books of these men have their right to something more than scant mention. To Mr. Elkin Mathews, particularly as the first pub-

lisher of the Rhymers' Club books and as the issuer of John Gray's first volume of poetry, bibliophiles owe a debt of gratitude. In the early days of the nineties Mr. John Lane became associated with him, until the autumn of 1894 witnessed 'Parnassus divided into two peaks.' Later, after the Wilde débâcle, an extraordinary figure, worthy of a romance, in the person of the late Leonard Smithers, who was at one time in the legal profession at Sheffield, took the field as a publisher by way of H. S. Nichols. He was no mere publisher but a man of considerable scholarship, who not only issued but finished the Sir Richard Burton translation of Catullus. Round him, to a considerable extent, the vanishing group rallied for a little while before Death smote them one by one. Here is no place to pay due justice to this amiable Benvenuto Cellini of book printing himself, but it must be remembered his figure bulks largely in the closing scenes. He kept Dowson from starvation. Beardsley wrote of him as 'our publisher.'[1] He, when others failed, had the courage to

[1] It is interesting that in an unpublished letter of Beardsley's to Smithers when the latter was intending to produce *The Peacock*, an unpublished quarterly, Beardsley promises him his best work.

launch on the English publishing market the released Wilde's now famous *Ballad of Reading Gaol.* If he did exceed certain rules for himself, he at least took risks to help others. He was no supine battener on the profits of books for young ladies' seminaries. He was a printer, and his bankruptcy may be said to have closed the period.

Lastly in this chaunt of omissions comes the drama of the nineties. Unfortunately the drama, in so far as it affects the group of the nineties with which we are concerned, is almost a nullity. Aubrey Beardsley once commenced a play, which was never heard of, in collaboration with Brandon Thomas. Ernest Dowson wrote what Beardsley called a 'tiresome' playlet. John Davidson perpetrated a number of plays such as *Bruce* (1886), *Smith, a tragic farce* (1888), *Scaramouch in Naxos*, and two other plays in 1889 when he was feeling his way, and translated much later as hackwork a play of François Coppée's and Victor Hugo's *Ruy Blas.* Theodore Peters' pastoral and other similar trifles only go to show how barren the group itself was in the dramatist's talent. Nor can much be said for such poetic plays as Theodore Wratislaw's *The Pity of Love.*

But it must be remembered, as a matter of fact, such a sweeping conclusion may not only be unjust but even impertinent. For where in all the theatres of the London of the nineties would the plays (if they had been written) of these young men have found a home? Probably the dramatic output of the nineties was nil because there were no small theatres in London at that date of the type to give these young men a hope that any works they might write could be produced. So only at the end of the decade do we see the dramatic outburst when the Irish movement founded a theatre of its own and produced J. M. Synge, and also when Miss Horniman gave Manchester a repertory theatre, and then Stanley Houghton came.

True, at the same period as the nineties Oscar Wilde was producing plays burlesquing the world of Society, and Bernard Shaw was getting ready to launch his own works by bombasting every one else's; but the little movement of the younger men remained dramatically dumb. Nothing came even when George Moore produced *The Strike at Arlingford* and John Todhunter *The Black Cat.* It is a hard thing to believe that all these young men were devoid of the dramatic instinct. I

prefer for my part to blame the London theatrical world for the lack of those minute theatres which have become so much a part of the night life of big continental cities and are so admirably adapted for the production of the works of new dramatists.

Indeed, the theatrical atmosphere of London at that time was in its usual perpetual state of stuffiness. There was not even a beneficent society then such as we now have in the Pioneer Players, whose theatre (if one may so symbolise it) is the charity house for emancipated dramatists. Ibsen's *Doll's House* had been produced in London just before the nineties' epoch began, and, like anything new in popular art over here, raised the hue-and-cry. Then, too, the big 'star' curse, which Wilde himself so justly spurned, was permanently settled on our own insular drama like a stranglehold on the author.

Outside England, in the big art world of the continent, Schnitzler was beginning in Vienna.[1] Maurice Maeterlinck, in Belgium, had begun[2] too the drama of expressive silences which came to light in Paris. There were Sudermann and Hauptmann in Germany; Echegaray in Spain; D'Annunzio in Italy; Ibsen

[1] *Anatol*, 1889–90. [2] *La Princesse Maleine*, 1889.

and Björnstjerne Björnson finishing their work for the Scandinavian drama; while the playwrights of Paris were, as always, feverishly fabricating all sorts of movements, as when Paul Fort, a boy of eighteen, founds in 1890 the Théâtre d'Art. But what was going on in England? Pinero's *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, Wilde's *Salomé*, and his light comedies, together with stuff by Henry Arthur Jones, Sydney Grundy, etc., represented the serious drama. The critics were perturbed, as they generally are. The musical comedy and its singing, pirouetting soubrettes deluded the populace into the belief that it had a great drama, when all these spectacles should really have been housed in London in spacious tea-rooms for the benefit of that multitude which is fond of tinkling melody and teapots. There was not even in London a single Überbrettlbuhnen, as the Germans mouth it, where those who love beer could go to hear poets recite their verse *à la* Otto Bierbaum, let alone little theatres where what we so dolefully term the serious drama could be played.

Even, too, in those days, the newspaper critics, muzzled by the business department, which has never any wish to lose its theatrical advertisements, said little, with a few honest

exceptions like Bernard Shaw. Max Beerbohm, when he took over the critical work of Shaw on *The Saturday Review* was obviously unhappy. English theatres rapidly became as elaborate and as pompous as the Church Militant in its palmy days. They kept growing in size. In London, indeed, the small theatre never had its boom. Indeed, the nineties was the age when the big theatres were being built to fill their owners' pockets and the men of the nineties themselves (be it for whatever reason you like) did not produce a single play.

EPILOGUE

It all seems a long time ago now since those days when Verlaine was as a lantern for these young men's feet, to guide them through the mazes of Art. Thirty years ago and more Wilde was disclosing 'décolleté spirits of astonishing conversation'; Zola influenced that Byron of pessimism, Thomas Hardy, to beget *Jude the Obscure* (1895), and when the critics assailed him the Wessex giant guarded a 'holy silence' which has denied us up till now an emancipated novel such as the French and Italians have, though James Joyce may yet achieve it for us. It was also the age of youth in hansom cabs looking out on the lights of London's West End which spread out before them as in a 'huge black velvet flower.' Ibsen, Tolstoy, Maeterlinck, Nietzsche, D'Annunzio, and Dostoievsky were beginning to percolate through by means of translations that opened out a new world into which everybody hastily swarmed. It was an age in which young men

frankly lauded the value of egoism. Indeed, it was essentially the age of young men. In those days a genital restiveness which came over from France started the sex equation. A hothouse fragrance swept across the pudibond wastes of our literature. Hectics came glorying in their experiences. Richard of the Golden Girl with his banjo lifts up his voice to chaunt 'a bruisèd daffodil of last night's sin.' Women like George Egerton in her *Keynotes* take questions further than Mrs. Lynn Linton had ever done in the previous decade. Exoticism, often vulgar when not in master hands, blabbed out its secrets in works like *The Woman who Did*. Confounding the good with the bad, a wail went up against the so-called gospel of intensity. Sometimes it was in the serious reviews and weeklies; at another time it was Harry Quilter. Some young undergraduates at Oxford, even in *Aristophanes at Oxford* (May, 1894), were filled with 'an honest dislike for *Dorian Gray*, *Salomé*, *The Yellow Book*, and the whole of the lackadaisical, opium-cigarette literature of the day.' *Punch* produced a Beardsley Britannia and sang of:

> The Yellow Poster girl looked out
> From her pinkly purple heaven,
> One eye was blue and one was green,

Her bang was cut uneven.
She had three fingers on one hand,
And the hairs on her head were seven.

And all these criticisms now, all these quarrels, are like old spent battlefields the sands of gracious time have covered over and hidden from view. Alone the best work of the period remains; for good art has no period or special vogue.

Indeed, the elements that destroy the worthless, that winnow the chaff from the grain, have been at work. For us, indeed, this landscape has changed from what it once was, and looking at it now we acquire a new impression which was denied to the critics of the age itself. Some of us, without a doubt, have gone to the opposite extreme and prattle about it as an age of platitudes, and accuse a work of art of being as old as *The Yellow Book*. One might as well accuse a violet of being as old as the Greek Anthology. For always, to those wandering back in the right spirit to those days, there will come something of the infinite zest which stirred the being of the men of the nineties to create art. It was such an honest effort that one has to think of those times when Marlowe and his colleagues were athrob with æsthetic aspiration to find a similitude. The

nineties, indeed, are a pleasant flower-garden in our literature over which many strange perfumes float. There are times when one wishes to retreat into such places, as there are moments when the backwaters enchant us from the main stream.

It has been said it was an age of nerves. If by this is implied a keener sensitiveness to certain feelings pulsating in the art of this movement, one will not have very far to go to find its cause in the French impressionistic school of Manet, which, after saturating all types of French artists, undoubtedly invaded writers over here even before the movement of the nineties began. On the age without a doubt it had a lasting influence, so that to a certain degree, without being over-busy with what went before, we may say its writers brought it to no small degree into common use in our literature. But just as impressionism in painting had existed centuries before in the ever-busy mind of men like Leonardo da Vinci, one cannot go so far as to say it had never existed before in our literature. Such a statement would be perhaps frivolous. But it was with these men it first came to exist as a kind of cry of a new clan. It was these men who were essentially hectics who essayed to etch the exotic

impression. The majority of the work of the movement, in fact, can be described as impressionisms of the abnormal by a group of individualists. For in all their work the predominant keynote will be found to be a keen sense of that strangeness of proportion which Bacon noted as a characteristic of what he called beauty. It is observable as much in the poems of Dowson as in the drawings of Beardsley, two of the leading types of the movement. It vibrates intensely in the minor work of men like Wratislaw, and also in John Gray's early volume, as I have endeavoured to show. All Mr. Arthur Symons's criticism is a narration of his soul's adventures in quest of it. It stirred the genius of Charles Conder, and vitalizes the rather cruel analysis of Hubert Crackanthorpe. We see it almost as the animating spirit of the age itself in Oscar Wilde's poems, *The Sphinx* and *The Harlot's House*. It has become disseminated like a perfume from the writings of Pater in the men who came after him. It was, so to speak, a quickening stimulus to them as the rediscovery of a manuscript of Catullus, or a Greek figure was in the years of the Renaissance itself. With it came a sense of freedom. An attempt was made, because of it, for instance, to

emancipate our literature to the same extent as the literatures of Latin countries move untrammelled by a hesitancy in the choice of certain themes. And people at the time, watching the fate of the prime movers, cried with a great deal of assurance, 'That way lies madness!'

Be this as it may, the men of the nineties bequeathed a certain subtleness of emotion to our art that is not without its value. They took Byron's satanism and inflamed it with the lurid light of Baudelaire. *Buveurs de lune* after the manner of Paul Verlaine, they evoked something of the ethereal glamour of moonlight itself. A realist like Crackanthorpe tried to tread the whole *via dolorosa* without faltering by the wayside. Poetry caught the mood of bizarre crises and Edgar Wilson wrought a strange delicate world of visions. In Max Beerbohm irony took on a weird twinge of grace almost Pierrot-like. Perhaps, indeed, they all had something of the Pierrot quality in them. Beardsley himself was enchanted by that little opera without words, 'L'Enfant Prodigue.' Dowson made a play about him. *The Happy Hypocrite* might be a story of the Pierrot himself grown old.

As I have hinted, much of the work con-

ceived by these men was doomed to die, as in the case of every movement. What then remains, what is their balance to the good? Who knows? About everything man has loved and fashioned there abides vestiges of the interest of humanity. Only some things are easier to recall than others. They stand out more, so that one is bound to remark them. They have, so to speak, a *cachet* of their own. Among these in this movement there comes the work of the men I have so hastily attempted to realise. Each has about him something of that quality which is indefinable, but easily recognisable. Each has his charm for those who care to come with a loving interest.

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